

Halo: The Ancient Ones

by mchmstr39

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Summary: The remaining Spartan IIs and Spartan IIIs struggle to save Humanity from the remnants of the Covenant. But when one of their own truly has turned and unleashed the greatest power in the galaxy, they might've finally met their match.

## 1. Homecoming

Note: This is a sequel to: **\*\*Halo: In the Hands of the Enemy\*\*** so I suggest you read that before reading this. I also do not own anything associated with Halo or Halo 2.

### Chapter 1: Homecoming

Red hot embers swirled in the turbulent air, glowing eerily in the thick black smoke. Flames roared in towering buildings and others collapsed to the ground in deafening amalgams of crunching metal and stone. Debris and bullet casings littered the ground around the soldier's feet as he stood in silence surveying the scene around him. A swarm of missiles roared through the red sky leaving trails of white smoke. His focus snapped back to the ground as a dark shape slowly stood up from under the rocks and concrete that was on top of him. Thin wisps of smoke rose into the air and a whining noise was just barely audible over the noise around them. The silhouetted shape rose up to it's full seven and half feet but made no other movement after that. After a few tense seconds of waiting the shape spun around, his gold visor reflecting the hell that was surrounding them.

> "I was always the best," the smug, distorted voice said through the external speakers of his helmet. He started walking forward, taking an extra large stride to avoid stepping on a corpse of a fallen Spartan. The other soldier, identical in almost every respect to his adversary, snapped his BR55 Battle Rifle to eye level and rested his finger a hair's width away from firing a burst off.<br> "John, what are you doing all of this for? You were our best hope and look at you now!" John only laughed as he walked closer to the other Spartan who was walking backwards at the same rate.

> "It's time to end this." The air around him distorted and an ethereal blue glow emanated from behind the fractured golden visor. His hand rose into the air but melted away into darknessâ€|<p>

Will snapped awake and blinked his eyes quickly in the dim purple light of the \_Pandora's Box's \_bridge. He looked around and saw the other Spartans leaning against a wall, their BR55s lying ready in their arms. A low thrumming reverberated through the ship's superstructure as it hurtled through the darkness of Slipspace. The dream that he had just had slowly faded from his memory and no matter how hard he tried he could not recall the images that were so tangible just seconds before. Something shifted to his right and he whipped his head over and turned his flashlight on. Halogen light flooded the dark shadow and he saw a Spartan put their arm up to shield their eyes from the light.

> "Uh, turn it off," a female voice called over her helmet's external speakers.<br> "Sorry," he replied quickly and flicked the light off. Linda stood up and walked out of the darkness, her S2-AM Sniper Rifle in her hand.

> "How long have we been asleep for?" Will brought up two mission timers; one was counting up, the other counting down.<br> "We jumped thirty-three and half hours ago, and we've got only about an hour until we exit Slipspace."

> "That's all?" she asked surprised.<br> "Yeah, why don't you wake them up, I'm going to bring the weapons systems back online." She nodded and walked over to the Spartan-IIIs and got them up. Over at what appeared to be main holographic terminal, Will, instinctively, moved his hands around the dancing pink, orange, and blue shapes. A diagram of the Planet Killer appeared in the middle of the room and portions of it were highlighted. He tapped a few more commands and areas all along the hull were also highlighted, but instead of a cool blue color, almost all of them were blood red. "Damn," Will said out loud. Linda looked over at him.

> "What's wrong?"<br> "The MAC stations took out just about all of the turrets, all we've got is the number twelve battery, AA turretsâ€|and the main cannon." She glanced over at the main view port and saw all of the holes in the purple metal caused by the Humans' barrage. Plasma slowly ebbed from the burst conduits and spilled over the ship, leaving large scars and some large sections were totally dark.

> "Guess you better learn how to fire the big one themâ€|" Will gave an audible puff of air and started to study the different systems.<p>

"Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|" Sparks of energy rippled across the bow of \_Pandora's Box \_and inched it's way along the dull pronged hull. Vibrations rippled throughout the hull they decelerated from Slipspace and reentered the realm of normal physics. Scanners blared proximity warnings as the ship rammed it's way through the debris of Terra Defense Force which had sprinted from Jupiter to try and defend Earth from the surprise Covenant assault.

> "The computer has targeted all nearby Covenant ships. Will, we need to move fast, they've almost overwhelmed all of our- hold on, we're being hailed." Kat, Spartan-501, looked up from a nearby console and looked at the viewport. A translucent face appeared on it. The man they were staring at looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks, his silver hair slicked to his wrinkled forehead by the sweat slowly dripping down.<br> "\_Spartan Oh-Four-Three?\_\_ You're a sight for sore eyes son. I hope you know how to fly that thing because we need all the help we can get\_."

> "Thank-you sir, I think we've got it down well enough to do some damage. Just tell our ships to stay clear of the largest concentrations." The Admiral's grey eyes squinted together but he trusted the Spartan's judgment.<br> "\_Just do whatever the hell you need to do." \_His image disappeared and Kat went back to the console in front of her.

> "Alright, I've got a group of about thirty Covenant capital ships just over ten thousand kilometers off of our starboard." Chris, Spartan-952, dipped the right side of the Planet Killer's nose and the Earth slid to their left, the Moon and a small cluster of ships replacing it. Molten rock still spewed into space from the Moon as it continued to fly off in it's new orbit.<br> "Let's give this a tryâ€|" Will's hand cupped a small orb and it pulsed for a few seconds before it winked away. All of the displays dimmed to almost nothing as did all of the lights inside of the ship. Plasma from the broken conduits mysteriously stopped venting and the red hot coils began to cool down. Blue energy began to dance back and forth between the two prongs as it slowly built up strength. Static washed over the Spartans' shields in waves as the energy increased in bursts. Bolts of plasma lightning arced over the hull from a steadily growing ball of blinding plasma at the point where the two prongs separated. This building of power lasted for a little over thirty seconds before the orb reappeared on the control panel. Through a fully dimmed viewport and with his own visor darkened to it's highest setting, Will squinted tightly as he cupped the orb again. Their ship shuddered violently and the weakened engines strained to prevent the mammoth from being blown backwards. A beam of plasma ripped from between the ship and headed straight for the group Covenant in a blink of an eye. The capital ships melted away into pools of liquid metal before their reactors detonated, setting off a chain reaction that took out their nearby comrades. Back on \_Pandora's Box\_, the reinforced armor around the prongs became red hot but survived the blast relatively intact. Vents all along the sides of the ships popped open and vented the superheated air into space and at the same time, the powerful generators deep in the hull powered on and began the slow process of replenishing their plasma supplies. Will took a few deep breathes and looked at the others silently while flickers of golden energy laced around; their shields had been blown away from the shot.

> "Wellâ€|that worked pretty well," Kat said finally. The others grunted in agreement and just waited. With the amount of plasma that the main cannon had sucked from their reserves, the Planet Killer was dead in space until they could replenish enough to get moving again.<br> "I have a hard time with the fact that the Covenant would build a ship this big, have it fire it's main cannon, and then just sit there waiting for the enemy to swarm around. I mean, we lost all but five percent of our shields," Chris commented. Will looked at the console and saw a quick animation of something that was pushed from the ship that kept repeating itself. Small red accents circled around it and he tapped the picture. Once again, the diagram of the ship appeared in the middle of the room and slowly began rotating around. Instead of just showing the ship, two small boxes appeared next to it with a zoomed in view of six pods moving away from the hull, three on each side. The main image showed the pods extended a little over a kilometer from the hull before stopping. They had arranged themselves so that the top ones were almost directly above the bridge, the middle ones parallel with the center deck, and the bottom two below the ship, but still inline with the top pods. Nothing happened for a few seconds but suddenly gold sheets unfurled from the three pods. Floating weightlessly in space, they glistened hypnotically as the sunlight reflected of the highs and lows in the sheets. While the

sheets were extending out, six columns extended out from the hull and connected to the pods just as the solar panels went taught. Instantly energy surged into the ship and was converted into plasma. Bars, that, five seconds ago, had been hair's width tall, steadily rose along the control panels which coincidentally also grew brighter and brighter. Colors played against the Spartans' armor as they stood and watched in amazement at the super-efficient solar panels that the Planet Killer possessed.

> "Kat, find another target for us." Kat did so and a marker appeared on the viewport's HUD that pointed to a cluster of Covenant much closer to Earth. Unfortunately, the planet they were trying to save was also on the other side of this group and would suffer almost a direct hit from their shot.<br> "Chris, bring us into a better firing position."

> "Yes, sir," he replied quickly. Thrusters on the starboard side of <em>Pandora's Box</em> came out of small encasements and pushed the ship horizontally for a few thousand kilometers. While they were repositioning, Will was finally able to get a good look at Earth and it was clear that it was suffering. Dark clouds were pouring into the upper atmosphere and being blown around the planet by the high winds. Every once in a while, a "small" explosion would be visible from space but would blend into the constant blue and orange explosions in space. Chris's expert piloting skills had swung the Planet Killer into a much better firing position and had put the largest part of the Covenant armada within their sights. Will once again powered up the cannon and waited as the plasma reserves emptied themselves. They fired another shot that vaporized more than eighty ships. But this devastating blow came at a price. Those Humans who hadn't heard the warning about moving, or were unable to break off from their aggressors, were also vaporized in the unrelenting wave of plasma.

> <em>"You're a savior Oh-Four-Three, but we need you down on the surface ASAP."</em> Unlike before, the Admiral only patched his voice through.

> "Aye, sir," Will responded and Chris set a course for the surface.<p>

## 2. Seattle

### Chapter 2: Seattle

The Phantom's engines pulsed rhythmically as Will fiddled with the throttle slightly. Small particles of dust were quickly blown away from the twin engines' exhaust and began heating the metal floor to a dark orange color. Linda was the last one aboard, carrying what was left of the equipment they had and the dead body of the marine who had come along with them on accident. She gingerly laid his body onto the alien craft's floor and walked up to the other Spartans who were gathered around the cockpit. The gravity lifts sealed shut and Will began to depressurize the hangar bay they were waiting in. Alarms echoed inside the four story room for ten seconds before they cut out and the shimmering shield in front of them quickly faded away. A small white haze floated off into space along with anything that wasn't locked down before hand. Will nudged the throttle forward a little and the Phantom's nose dipped down and exited the hangar.

> "Admiral Hagart, this is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three. We are leaving the Covenant ship now and are awaiting destination coordinates." Static hissed over the Phantom's speakers and the Spartans waited for a response. Off in the distance a Super MAC station exploded in orange

and white flames before slowly tumbling down towards the surface. Will tapped a symbol and switched to the UNSC K-Band. "This is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three, over." He hoped his call would break through the chatter of the main command channel.<br> "\_This is Rear Admiral Hirohito, Colonel Nickerson has requested reinforcements in Seattle and up until now we haven't been able to give him any."  
> <em>"Affirmative Admiral, we're on our way. Over and out." Will punched in the coordinates and sped off through the battle that was still raging in space. Covenant AA flak exploded all around their small craft but it trailed off, apparently following another target. A few missiles raced through the sky and impacted against a Seraph fighter a few kilometers off of their port side. The Atlantic Ocean swept past them to their right and Will prepared the Phantom for entry into the atmosphere.

Soft snow flakes floated through the air and lazily dropped to the already white ground. Off in the distance explosions echoed quietly and would abruptly be interjected by a rattle of automatic fire. The tall buildings glistened in the overcast sky and other than the battle that was raging all around, it would have been a very pretty winter morning in Seattle. Furthering this point was the presence of an almost pristine Covenant Dreadnought hovering a few thousand feet over the water. Colonel Nickerson pulled a pair of binoculars from his load bearing vest, and, from his position atop Queen Anne Hill, surveyed the scene below him. He focused on a few columns of black smoke rose into the air and dissipated into the cold fog. Something caught his ear and he turned around and watched as a dark shape flew towards them. Directing his binoculars on this new object, he saw that it was Phantom coming at them. From behind his neoprene face mask he ordered the AA turrets to open fire on it. Thunder echoed loudly as the cannons open fire, spewing explosive rounds in the direction of the Phantom. A few explosions made it's silver shields flare up and someone's voice crackled through his earpiece.  
> <em>"Hold your fire! Friendlies on board!" <em>Nickerson ordered them to stop and watched his suspicious soldiers creep up towards it as it descended to the ground. For a few seconds it hovered in the air not doing anything and he could see the agitation growing. Not wanting to be caught off guard, he shouldered his BR55 and kept it near him. At last, a tall shape descended from the orb of blue in the under belly and stepped onto the concrete ground. Three more followed afterwards, all heavily laden with equipment.  
> "Whoa! It's a Spartan!" someone yelled out and all of the Marines came in closer to get a better look at the super soldiers. They made their way through the mass of people and saluted to the Colonel when they were free.<br> "Sir, Spartan-Oh-Four-Three reporting. Admiral Hirohito ordered us to help you secure the city." Nickerson saluted back and turned around to face the city below them. He spoke with a voice that sounded quite young.  
> "We weren't expecting them to take any interest in actually capturing the city so we were caught off-guard when they dropped through the clouds and started to set up camp." This surprised Will. He had expected the Covenant to try and come back to their home planet as fast as possible to help their hierarchs. Then again the message maybe wasn't even sent out and they're just following the plans they had laid out. "Right now I've got a few battalions spread throughout the city and they seem to be containing those that have come down well enough but it's definitely taking its toll on our guys. I don't know how you like to operate, either as a group or by yourselves, so I've got no idea where to send you."<br> "Each of us can join in with a unit and coordinate between ourselves if you'd

like, sir," Will suggested. Nickerson moved his jaw and from under the black material he could see his lips contort.

> "Alright, I'll get you a transport out there and you can do your thing."<br> "Yes, sir," all of the Spartans responded and Nickerson did a double take when he heard the two female voices. He lifted his arm in the air and pointed to two Warthogs that were parked a couple of meters away. Their engines roared to life at once and they sped up to the Colonel and the Spartans.

> "Take the Spartans to First, Third, Eighth, and Twelfth platoons." The two drivers responded with a "Yes, Sir" and the Spartans jumped aboard, Kat and Will on one, Linda and Chris on the other. They sped off through the deserted city towards their destinations.<p>

Will sat anxiously in his seat with his rifle just a few millimeters from firing off a round. Buildings and wrecked cars zipped past them and they crossed over a few streets before getting onto the empty freeway. Scattered about were lonely cars sitting like time capsules in the cold winter air. Snow was piled all over the road and the Warthogs revved their engines a little more than usual as they drove over the slick roadway.

> "First and Twelfth platoons are on the far side of the city," their driver yelled out over the icy wind. Just as he said that the other Warthog exited and headed towards the waterfront. Following suit, their driver took another exit and entered into the dark city. The fog here, although not any thicker, felt like it was pressing itself upon you without any chance of an escape. A few of the windows were broken on the buildings and a quick scan of the ground below revealed crumpled bodies just barely visible under the fluffy white snow. Off in the distance a machine gun rattled off a burst of gunfire and fell silent. Kat was sitting in the back of the Warthog, leaning up against the LAAG and letting her heavy boots bounce off of the bumper. The rhythmic tapping suddenly fell silent and Will felt the Warthog shift around a little. He twisted around and saw standing up.<br> "What is it?" he asked but she gave no response. Will listened carefully and heard what she had heard. "Stop, stop the Warthog and shut it off." The driver looked at Will worriedly but decided to do as he said. There was absolutely no noise for almost a minute but then, out of nowhere, a deep thrumming reverberated through the dead streets. Both of the Spartans hopped out of the Warthog and ran up to a wall and watched as the driver scrambled over to them and pulled his M6C from it's holster. Up above them, a dark shape floated through the air with small portions of it glowing a ghostly blue. It slowed down over the Warthog and descended down through the fog and became visible. The Phantom's turrets swiveled back and forth unendingly as it scanned the streets for a target but finding none it rose back up and flew away at the exact same speed as before. Will and Kat stayed where they were, up against the glass wall, but the driver started to walk back through the snow towards his Warthog. Before they could call him back the thrumming pounded the streets but this time it was much faster and stronger. In the distance purple-pink plasma lances tore the streets up. The two Spartans smashed through one of the glass doors they were leaning up against but the driver wasn't able to make it in time. Strafing the vehicle, the Phantom vaporized the driver in a splash of superheated air and destroyed the Warthog which exploded and landed on it's side, flames roaring off of the dead carcass. Where their driver had been was now replaced with the remains of his leg, smoldering in the snow. Will laid on his back watching the split second carnage and waited a few minutes before getting up. The Phantom never returned, leaving the Spartans alone once again. They walked out of the building and

cautiously made their way down the sidewalk, rifles at the ready, their heads constantly swiveling back and forth for any sign of danger.

> "<em>Do you have any idea where we were headed<em>?" Kat finally asked over their comm channel.

> "No, I don't think we should keep heading this direction though," he replied as the faint glow of a gravity lift began to poke through the thick fog. Another burst of machine gun fire pierced the silence, but this time it was much closer and pronounced. With their enhanced hearing, they were able to hear faint yelling and shouting to their left. Looking down the street a few muzzle flashes reached their eyes a few seconds before the rattling sound of their weapons. Will sprinted off towards them as fast as he could. His powerful legs pounded into the street leaving small imprints and he called out that he was on his way.<br> "This is Spartan Oh-Four-Three coming from your three o'clock so hold your fire!"

> "<em>You're kidding me! A Spartan to reinforce us?"<br>

\_"Affirmative, I'll be there in a few seconds." Dark shapes slowly materialized through the haze and he almost barreled over a Marine who was laying prone with a sniper rifle. The sounds of battle flooded the surrounding area and he figured out what the forty or so Marines were doing. They were arranged in a crescent shape with the majority facing a street that dipped down steeply towards the water and was near the point where the gravity lift hit the surface. A few bursts of plasma flashed through the air but it seemed half-heartedly fired. Another hail of withering fire erupted from the determined Marines, intermixed by the loud chugging of the machine guns they had set-up. Will flicked over to a thermal filter and saw the shapes of a few Grunts about thirty meters down from him. He slid his BR55 into his shoulder and steadied his aim before popping off three consecutive bursts into one of the Grunts. A cloud of head erupted from the dead body and it fell to the ground. Noticing the newcomer, some of the Marines turned around and stared in awe.

> "Where's your commanding officer?" he asked. Someone pointed to a First Lieutenant leaning up against a metal barrier with his rifle resting on it. A quick burst came out and Will spotted another Grunt slump to the ground. "Sir, Spartan Oh-Four-Three reporting."<br>

"Good timing, we've been hearing reports that the Covenant are pouring out of the ship. These guys have been bugging us for a little but I think we've gotten them all."

> "We would have been here sooner but we were strafed by a Phantom patrolling the city and our vehicle and driver were killed."<br>

"Don't worry about it." The Lieutenant finally turned from the metal barrier and looked at Will. Like most of the soldiers fighting in the city, his face was covered by a black neoprene head mask, only revealing his grey eyes. "Are you the only one?"

> "No, she's over there." Will pointed to a Spartan standing with a barrier stopping at waist level, her rifle in the pit of her shoulder.<br> "The more the merrier. I was waiting to lead an assault once I had more men but considering you two are here I think we'll be okay." Will nodded and looked back down the street. The amount of gunfire had severely slackened and the Marines were now content to just keep their eyes on the surrounding streets and watch for anything coming at them. Will noticed images were flipping back and forth on the Lieutenant's monocle and he knew he was looking at whatever tacsat photos he could get a hold of. "That doesn't look good. About a hundred meters down the road and another forty over is a Covenant compound that's been set up. Before we can move anywhere we need to take it out because from what I'm seeing on the thermal scans, there's a lot of activity. I'd like you to go and mark it for

an artillery strike."

> "Yes, sir."<br> "Alright, let me upload the coordinates," a small message in the shape of an ancient letter appeared on Will's HUD for a few seconds, "just radio once you've arrived and marked it."

### 3. Aiding the Eighth

#### Chapter 3: Aiding the Eighth

Will hurried up the last few stairs of the blown out stairway. A light flickered on and off, caught in a never ending cycle as the cold air and snow flakes blew in through the charred concrete and steel walls. The fog had already claimed the eightieth floor of the building he was in and he carefully came up to the shattered windows. All around him was the remnants of what had been a normal day at work. Coffee cups were frozen solid and those computers that were still functioning had whatever work their operator had been looking at when the Dreadnought dropped through the atmosphere ringed in hellfire. Quietly crouch-walking up to the window, his boots crushed the blown out glass into the generic carpeting. Hundreds of feet below him was the Covenant compound, glowing through the haze. No sounds reached him at the height he was lurking at but he wouldn't take any chances of making a mistake and alerting them to his presence. Pulling out a small GPS module from his backpack, Will pointed it directly at the ground and activated it. It beeped twice and flashed an error message. The fog was blocking the signal from reaching the ground.

> "Shit," he said out loud before messaging Harris. "Lieutenant, we've got a problem, this fog is blocking the signal from my position. I can reposition and try to send it againâ€¦"<br> "\_Do it if you can. But, don't, under any circumstances, openly engage the enemy."

> <em>"Affirmative, Oh-Four-Three over and out." Will stepped away from the ledge and walked back through the office building. He took the stairs four at a time, making it to the bottom in only a few minutes. His instincts kicked in and he disappeared out of the building and onto a street parallel to the one the encampment was on. The waterfront area had been hit the hardest in the attack because of its position under the Covenant capital ship. Craters pockmarked the streets and mangled bodies littered the streets while the skyscrapers that towered over head were now empty shadows of their once mighty grandeur. The Spartan slowly and methodically made his way along the sides of the buildings until he was a few blocks down from the encampment. Situated on the flat street of the waterfront and mixed between the MAG-LEV train rails, skyscraper bases, and the many plush clubs and restaurants was the center of all the Covenant activity in the city. Portable shield generators glowed brilliantly and slightly distorted the figures of the aliens that walked behind them. Levitating in the air were small guard towers manned by Jackals and their Beam Rifles. Tents had been arranged in the center of the compound and had even more shields situated around them. Will pulled the GPS out again and leveled it at the largest tent. Holographic gold ribbons "fluttered" in the wind and the unmistakable crowns of Brutes in the Royal Guard armor moved back and forth. For a few seconds he considered pulling back and alerting the Colonel about the possible presence of a Prophet or high ranking Covenant but the Covenant weren't the biggest threat anymore, at least once they were removed from Earth. Will pulled the trigger on the side of the module



and three invisible lasers triangulated the position of the tent.

> "Coordinates sent, possible ranking Covenant in proximity," He reported to the Lieutenant before jogging down the street. A quiet rumble of thunder off in the distance and the 120mm high-explosive rounds screamed into the air. A safe distance down the street, Will squatted down and watched the Covenant camp become enveloped in rolling flames and dust. One stray round impacted on the side of a building and exploded, pushing it beyond it's limits. Cracking in the middle, the skyscraper tumbled towards the water and landed on top of the obliterated camp. Tendrils of blue plasma licked at the air through the thick wave of dust and snow that was rushing towards Will. Turned his head away from the cloud and felt it slam into him. Small particles of concrete, alien metal, and chunks of ice ricocheted off of his shields but they held at half strength. Once it had passed by him he stood up and looked at his armor which, instead of being a jade green was now a dark grey color.<br> "\_Verify delivery of ordinance." \_Harris asked over the comm channel. Will flicked on his binoculars and scanned the pile of debris.

> "Affirmative, right on target, sir."<br> "\_Excellent, hold tight, we're on our way. Harris over and out." \_Waiting for the Marines, Will quickly removed the dust on his rifle to prevent jamming. A few hundred meters down the road was a large group of Marines in their white, grey, and black arctic camo BDUs. He headed over towards them and met up with the Lieutenant. Standing in the rear like a giant was Kat.

> "<em>Nice look," <em>she whispered over their private comm channel. Will didn't respond but looked at himself. The Marines fanned out to secure a perimeter and Harris called the Colonel.

> "This is Lieutenant Harris reporting. We've eliminated the Covenant camp in the city and are waiting for the other squads to link up so we can lead and attack on the ship."<br> "Negative Lieutenant, Eighth platoon is under heavy attack and needs immediate reinforcement. Go there and help."

> "Yes sir! We're moving out, Eighth needs our help." Harris stood up and the Marines cried out, scrambling over the wreckage. A few explosions rocked the city when they were running and anxiety began showing on the faces of the Marines. They arrived at a corner in the road and the sounds of the battle were almost deafening. A loud crack of a sniper rifle broke through and an Elite fell in front of the Lieutenant, missing it's head. He looked back and began making motions with his hands indicating half of the platoon would get some covering fire to go across the street. One of the machine gunners came up to the front and prepped to fire. He took a few deep breaths and continued to shift his grip while fifty marines making the dash lined up next to him. Someone tapped the gunner on his shoulder and he rolled around the corner and unloaded. The machine gun quickly began tearing the slanted street to pieces as the Covenant, who were behind their portable shields and easily numbering over a hundred, looked around confused at the new enemy behind them. Those Marines who were dashing across fired off burst after burst from their BR55s, spraying different colors of blood all across the street. Will slid around the corner and opened fire when Kat tapped his shoulder and shot across the road. He found one Elite with his shields down and put three bursts into his skull which exploded onto the Grunts around him. After the first seconds of confusion, the Covenant troops regained their composure and started firing back. Blue plasma splashed around the machine gunner who ducked back around the wall. A couple of bolts hit Will and his shields dropped to twenty-five percent. Alarms blared in his ears and he got back behind cover. Harris was just behind the gunner and was again flicking through

satellite photos.<br> "Eighth platoon is just about a block and a half up that way, they're surrounded on three sides by the Covenant troops. We ran into the largest group but they're farthest away also."

> "Linda, Chris, this is Will, our platoon is down on the waterfront. If you can just put some heavy fire on the Covenant in front of us we can cut through them and link up."<br> "\_Alright," \_a sniper rifle shot rang over Linda's intercom. Will got sight of a Jackal's upper body explode in a cloud of purple. A new intensity of fire came down on the Covenant and rounds impacted on the battered road. Marines pulled grenades from their load bearing vests and primed them. Harris counted from five and they got out of cover and threw theirs. One Marine was pummeled by plasma and fell to the ground, his grenade's handle popping off. Will hurried out and kicked the grenades into the air. The small green orb arced over the Covenant and detonated at almost the exact same time as the others. Orange flames washed over the aliens and the one in the air exploded sending shrapnel down on those below. Once the black smoke had disappeared, the full scope of the carnage became evident. All colors of blood were sprayed on the pockmarked walls, windows were blown out, and the remains of bodies slid down the road. Only a few severely wounded Elites remained and they were quickly taken down.

> "Move out!" Harris yelled across the street and the Marines swarmed up the road on either side. They arrived at the next road and could see the shapes of Marines shooting to Will's 2 and 10 o'clock positions. "Sergeant Maloney, take your men around and flank those Covenant, I'll go right! Remember, we've got friendlies on the other side of the Covenant so make sure you know where your shots are going!" The Lieutenant's voice barely made it over the sounds of gunfire and the two groups split. Will stayed in the front with Harris and came up to the corner of the street they were on. A few Covenant were visible and the machine gunner opened fire again. Other Marines, including Harris and Will, jumped out from behind the building and opened fire while charging forward. A group of Grunts fell to the ground while the Elites roared in rage and started to fire. Their shots hit the mark on a few Marines who fell to the ground screaming in agony. One Elite fired off a few rounds from his Carbine and hit a Marine in front of Will. His head exploded in a cloud of bone and blood that sprayed on Will's visor but when he tried to wipe it away all it did was smear. He cursed loudly and grabbed a handful of snow then wiped across the gold lens. Luckily it melted fast enough and washed enough of the blood off to let him see again. More Covenant came around the corner and walked into the wall of lead that the Humans were spraying. Like usual, the first to fall were the Grunts who were less skilled than a Marine. Will was the first to round the corner and slammed the butt of his rifle into the chest of an Elite caught off-guard by the cyborg. It's chest collapsed in on itself and the Elite crumpled to the ground, a steady flow of purple blood coming from his mouth. He fired a few bursts into it to make sure it was dead and took off again. A few bolts of plasma impacted around his feet and he crouched down before picking off three Grunts cowering behind a burnt out coupe. One grenade went off in the middle of the street and vaporized a group of Jackals who had arranged themselves in a defensive ring. Chunks of meat fell all around one Jackal who wasn't killed got ejected into the sky, falling to the ground in a crumpled heap thirty meters away. The last of the Marines came around the corner and jogged to their formerly besieged comrades. Will looked across the street and saw the other squad finishing up the last of the Covenant on their side. He walked past a pile of dead bodies in blood stained snow. Other Marines were leaning

up against something, nursing whatever wounds that they had. Off in the corner he spotted a Spartan stand up. Human and Covenant blood covered his armor and the silver metal underneath their green paint was showing. Will looked at his own armor and saw that over the grey dust was the same montage of colors. Both of the Spartans saw each other and met up.<br> "You look like you've been busy," Chris said.

> "I could say the same. Where's Linda?" Chris just looked around in the sky and Will understood instantly. He flicked on his squad markers and three blue triangles appeared. The one he was looking for, though, was a few hundred feet in the air. Located in the rubble of a blown out portion of a building, Linda was only visible because of the tag. "Nice spot."<br> "\_Thanks, it took a little bit to get up here though."

> <em>"I bet, but come on down, we've cleared everything."

> "<em>Affirmative."<em>Linda's comm cut off and the tag started moving. The other half of their platoon met up with the beleaguered Eight and started moving the wounded into safer areas. Three D77-TC Pelican drop ships flew over to them and loaded up those who couldn't walk. Will went over to Lieutenant Harris and spoke to him.

> "My squad and I could assault the ship if you would like."<br> "Negative, reports are that the Covenant are leaving."

> "They're abandoning the city?"<br> "Yeah, and every other city they landed at, apparently they lost the heart to fight." This didn't sound like the Covenant Will had fought for his entire life, they didn't just lose the will to fight. But sure enough the purple ship's engines roared to life and started to accelerate through the atmosphere but it wouldn't make it. A loud sonic boom smashed through the city. Windows shattered all around them, spraying shards of glass all around them. Another explosion rocked the city and from where Will was standing he saw the front portion of the Dreadnought's nose exploding in blue flames before slamming into the ground. Dark clouds of dirt and snow rose up into the air and the ground shook beneath their feet. More explosions continued to ripple across it's hull as the once beautiful ship buried itself into the ground. Over head a Marathon-class Cruiser dropped through the clouds and hovered where the Dreadnought used to be, it's MAC cannon steaming.

#### 4. Second Coming

##### Chapter 4: Second Coming

Planet Coral, Trinity System, Three weeks ago&#160;|

Small purple shapes slowly dropped through the maelstrom of AA fire towards the planet's surface. Dark red explosions were quickly engulfed in thick black smoke that fired out small pieces of superheated metal. One Phantom took a few direct hits and quickly plummeted to the surface in a trail of blue plasma and acrid smoke. Thankfully, the cloud cover had provided the rather small landing parties ample protection from visual sightings and they weren't picked up by the Human radar. Inside one of the Phantoms, a platoon of SpecOps Elites waited anxiously. None of them said anything to each other, instead checking their weapons over for an innumerable time while a few others checked out the features of their new helmets. The only noticeable difference was a small pod that had been integrated into the right temple of the helmet and two small crests that swept over the Elite's elongated skull and rose only an inch or two above it in the rear. One of the soldiers, dressed in black like

the others, still stood out. His gold faceplate reflected the low purple light back onto the floor and he shifted back and forth, eagerly awaiting battle. A shudder rocked through the Phantom's hull and a few Elites who had been attaching plasma grenade launchers to the bottom of their Carbines looked up alarmed.

> "Get ready," the outsider said gruffly and blue lasers began emanating from the Elites' pods. They synched the straps on their backpacks one last time and made sure that their plasma daggers were tight on their legs. The gravity lift in the center of the holding bay came to life and cool air rushed in through it.

"Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|GO!" In a perfectly orchestrated maneuver, the entire Phantom, filled with twenty-four Elites and one Spartan, exited in only a matter of seconds. John's boots hit the concrete top of a building and he ducked down like the other Elites as the Phantom took off again. A constant barrage of bullets pounded the side of the craft and a small grey haze trailed behind it as it rose back into the atmosphere. Getting a quick survey of the surrounding city, he realized that the pilot had dropped them off almost a kilometer short of their target building. Easily distinguishable because of its size, the dual towers rose into the air and glinted in the evening sun. A quick burst of gunfire raked the rooftop and the SpecOps squad began scanning for targets, their new toys coming into play. One of the Elites flicked to an x-ray filter and saw a few skeletons leaning up against the wall of a building to their right. He leveled his Carbine and pumped half a clip into the wall and followed it up with a round from his grenade launcher. The small blue orb arced towards the crumbling wall and detonated on impact. With his filter still on, he saw different bones scatter randomly and gave a pleased grunt.

John continued looking around the city as the Elites began to grow impatient. "Let's move out," he ordered and then stood up, jogging across the gravel top of the building. There was a slight hesitation from the squad but it was to be expected, it had been a last minute assignment by the Prophet of Truth in case John needed their help for some reason. Following behind him, the Elites moved across the open space, always scanning their surroundings. Just as John reached the door he stopped and crouched down. A cluster of their pod lasers dropped onto small square protruding from the roof. He moved backwards and leveled his Carbine while the Elites facing the door did the same. All at once they unloaded an entire clip into it.

Concrete exploded away in a cloud of dust as the radioactive rounds pummeled the stairwell. After the barrage of fire, it slowly crumpled down on itself in an even larger cloud of debris that slowly floated away into the air. John walked up to it and saw a bloody arm sticking through the rubble and walked over to the edge of the building. He pulled out a small purple device and clipped it to the railing. His armored fingers grabbed a small silver object on the front of the device and a glowing blue tether of energy coiled behind it.

Attaching it to a clip on his armor, he waited for the Elites before kicking off the side and rappelling down the wall. Glass cracked and splintered as the heavy boots slammed into it, falling weightlessly to the ground below them. Echoing through the city was the crack of a lone sniper round. John whipped his head to left and up only to watch an Elite give a warbling cry and tumble downwards. Purple blood was splattered against the window he had been in front of, a small hole in it with spider web like cracks streaking away from it. The Spartan let off of the resistance on the tether and sped towards the bottom. Another round impacted against a window, just barely missing an Elite who sped up as well. The Master Chief dropped to the ground and took a knee as he scanned the dead streets. Most of the Covenant landing force had been sent to a large military outpost about 30 kilometers

from the city, but even from that distance the sounds of the fighting were ferocious. A small group of Marines jogged down the street and were instantly cut down by the precise fire from the Elites.

<em>Almost like Spartansâ€|almost. <em>John had taken a liking to the SpecOps Elites, unlike their zealot brethren, these soldiers lived only for the thrill of killing and nothing more. No Sacred Rings, no Great Journey, nothing, all they wanted was to feel the blood pulsing through their veins as bullets slashed at the air just millimeters from their skulls. A quick banter between them ensued but it quickly ended. The Master Chief ordered the Elites to move out and they made their way through the streets without any further interference. Arriving at their target building, John examined the barricades that had been set up but weren't being used by anyone. Titanium-A barriers were scattered around the terrace at the base of the twin tower building in a way that would make it just about impossible to get any oblique angle shots on the defenders. He walked forward and flicked his fingers. Crumpling in a symphony of screeching metal, the barricades literally collapsed in on themselves and created a path for the fallen Spartan. The Elites followed behind him lazily. John walked up the stairs triumphantly and shot out the tinted glass windows. Shards were sprayed all inside of the grand lobby.

> "What is this place?" one of the Elites asked almost rhetorically.<br> "Military headquarters. Typical though, it's been evacuated," The Master Chief replied quickly.

> "Then what are we doing here?" He ignored the Elites' outburst and walked through the dimly lit room. Datapads were scattered around the marble floor but all of them were offline. John kicked one as he went past it. Small pieces of the object skidded on the slick floor in a shower of sparks.<br> "Wait down here; make sure no one comes in behind me." One of the Elites barked in acknowledgement and started ordering his troops around. Bypassing the elevators, John hurried up the stairs, feeling the presence of the artifact slowly growing stronger.

Blinding white light washed over the Spartan's armor. Inside the clean room, different projects were lying in whatever state their technician had left it in. Most of the computers were offline but the few that were still on were locked down so tight that it would take weeks to hack through the system. Near the rear of the room John saw a large metal crate sitting on the floor.

> "<em>Demon, Human reinforcements are coming up the street, whatever you are doing, you'd best hurry up and finish<em>." He ignored the message. His hands rested gently on the box and he slowly opened it up. A grey mist floated around inside, obscuring a rather large black object and as he reached down to pick it up, a tingling sensation pulsed through his veins. The Spartan placed it around his wrist methodically and waited. For a few seconds nothing happened but like a tidal wave, it hit him at once. Knowledge, power, strength, everything that the Forerunners had accumulated in their dominance was now his to control. He stood up and walked out of the clean room then down the flights of stairs to the main lobby. Tracers arced back and forth in the weakening light and were quickly returned by green trails from Carbine shots. The sound of thunder rumbled through the streets as an M808B Scorpion fired off a shot. Flames and concrete fell on the Chief as he left the lobby. A few dead Elites were sprawled on the ground in pools of their own blood but he didn't care. There was a sudden lull in fire and John knew exactly the reason, why was a Spartan coming from inside the building, let alone not shooting at the Elites? Without any effort on his part, the Master Chief summoned the deadliest warriors to ever walk the galaxy.

A few dark clouds swirled around the hundred or so Marines before materializing into ten black shapes. Standing almost nine feet tall, the Forerunner soldiers were clad in the same black metal as the gauntlet. Covering their faces were smooth helmets reaching all the way down to their chins with a blue sliver at eye level. Like the SpecOps Elites, an external pod was mounted on the right side but this was much smaller and looked more integrated than the Covenant's. Three spikes protruded from the rear of their helmets and concealed the long metal like hair that was bundled into a ponytail. The rest of their armor covered almost every inch of their somewhat skinny bodies but beneath the black metal bulged muscles that could easily overpower a Brute. One of the Forerunners, the largest of the group, wore a different style helmet though, which only covered his eyes and forehead, the rest being masked by a black silk material. The gunfire immediately stopped from both sides as John continued to walk towards his new soldiers. One Marine must've had a jumpy trigger finger because he began to unload on the captain of the Forerunners with his BR55. A blue haze became visible around him as the brass rounds disintegrated when impacting the psychic shield. The Captain turned to the soldier and angled both arms away from his side a little and activated the twin energy blades built into his wrist. Trying to help their comrade who was now in the sights of the Forerunner, the other Marines opened fire on him. An entire orb of blue materialized around him as he lunged at the Marine. Both of his blades sliced into him and the Captain quickly kicked the Marine off and aimed for another nearby. The Forerunners under his command followed suit and shouldered their weapons. Almost three feet long, the rifles they carried were incredibly sleek and was relatively skinny in comparison to some other weapons of the same size. Blackish-purple energy leapt from the barrels and tore through metal and flesh. Crimson blood sprayed across the ground as heads were sliced off and fist sized holes were punched through armor. A few of the Elites opened fire with their Carbines and finished off the last of the Marines who had been so savagely cut down. John smiled inside his helmet as the Elites got up from behind the barriers and congregated towards each other. He walked over towards them as if nothing was happening, eyeing the Elite Captain the entire time. Pushing through his subordinates, the Master Chief walked up to the Captain and placed his hand on his shoulder. Within a split second though, a blue pulsing blade sliced through his entrails and purple blood spilled to the ground. In one swift movement, the blade sliced out of the right side of the Captain's chest cavity and cut open all of the Elites unfortunate enough to be within the range of the blade. The others stood stunned but were quickly taken out by precise shots from the Forerunner's rifles. Purple blood was splashed across John's armor and he had to tread a little more determinedly to avoid losing his footing on the blood soaked steps. Standing silently and obediently were the Forerunner soldiers. After millennia of imprisonment by those Forerunner who believed that their power was too great for their own good, it was once again time for the greatest warriors to again reclaim their title.

\*\*For those of you who read the prequel to this, I've changed how the Forerunners looked (my interpretation of them) because with over a year of looking back on them, I just didn't like how I was originally imagined them.\*\*\_

## Chapter 5: The Mighty Fall

Three large shapes moved through the dimly lit hallways of the Covenant's former capital city. Red warning lights danced back, bathing everything in a blood red hue. On either side of the Master Chief were the two highest ranking Forerunners.

> "It was an act of desperation; we knew that if we could prevent ourselves from being consumed by the Flood, we would be able to one day return." The one on his right stated, although John could not see how, considering he had no mouth.<br> "We agreed that allowing one of our own to remain behind to release everyone once the parasite had been contained was a risk that we could not afford, not after what he had seen happen to our generals." Images of Captain Keyes flooded into his mind suddenly but he forced them out. Two large doors were directly in front of the trio and they opened with a deep groan.

Inside, shapes darker than the surrounding shadows moved about slowly, every once in a while stepping into the dark blue glow coming from the energy shields holding prisoners in. Quietly, Elites stood upright reciting carefully memorized verses of their religion.

> "<em>So full of hate were our eyes that none of us could see our war would yield countless dead but never victoryâ€|" <em>Standing in the center of the room was a Forerunner captain wearing the typical helmet that only covered his forehead. Small blue diodes glowed in the darkness along with the visor which glowed a brighter blue.

> "I'd like to see the Fleet Admiral," John stated. The guard pointed to a cell and one of the others deactivated the shield before pulling the Elite out. He limped over slowly before standing in front of the Chief. His armor was battered and broken as well as not having a helmet any longer. Dried blood caked his armor and his own blood glistened as it slowly made it's way down his battered body. "You're crew should be proud of the fight they put up, most of your brethren didn't survive the initial volleys."<br> "There is no glory in surrendering your life and the lives of your men to the enemy," he shot back quickly, a slight rasp in his voice from the fluid building up in his lungs. "The Great Journey has begun and we have been left behind."

> "Do not get hung up on that religious rhetoric, there was never a Great Journey, just your fool Prophets desperately trying to keep control of their bloated empire."<br> "Hold your tongue when speaking about the Holy Ones Human traitor! You have forsaken your own weak species and have turned against those that foolishly accepted you. Now you control theseâ€|creatures that falsely refer to themselves as the Gods."

> "You might want to watch what you say, you forget that these <em>creatures <em>have just obliterated the mighty Covenant armada, losing only three ships, none of them capitals." Anger flashed across the admiral's face and John knew he had hit a nerve. "And if Humans are so weak, why was one of them able to bring the Covenant down without much trouble?" The slight twitch in his cheek gave his attentions away. Lunging forward, the Elite tried to knock John to the ground but was himself slammed into the cold floor. Within a split second the Master Chief was on top of him, the blue blade projecting from his wrist hovering only a few inches away from the Elite's exposed flesh. "Tell me where the rest of your fleet is and you and your men may have an honorable death." Looking over to his right slightly John saw the other Elites crowded up against the energy shields.

Minor Fleet Master Husa' Mallamee stood in absolute shock after the reports of what had happened slowly filtered into his ship, the

\_Sanctimonious Trinity\_ and the other remaining ships that he had been given command of. No one on the bridge spoke as their thoughts were focused on the failing off their mighty Covenant. The perfect silence was broken as alarms quietly rang throughout the vaulted bridge chamber. Mallamee looked at the different view screens but couldn't spot whatever had triggered the alarms. Suddenly one of the smaller frigates near them exploded in a cloud of blue flame and molten metal. He lunged over to a holo-panel and tapped a small red circle. Red lights flashed on and the alarms now screamed throughout the entire ship.

> "Slipspace ruptures off the port!" and Elite yelled from the pit below the command deck. Just as he finished the only other Assault Carrier's nose was separated from the rest of the hull in a blinding flash. Fragments of metal almost as large as drop ships ricocheted off the silver shields of the capital ships without any harm.<br> "Charge all main batteries! Target any unconfirmed ship and fire at will!" The Fleet Master yelled out. It was too late though; a poorly aimed shot obliterated the engine housings and knocked the main generator offline. All of the lights inside shut off except for a few dim ones at the bottom of the walls and the artificial gravity became nonexistent. As he floated through the air, Mallamee grabbed a small protruding rod from the consoles and pushed himself towards the main door. Other crewmembers were moving there as well and waited for the Fleet Master to arrive. The door was cracked a little bit and once they opened up the control panel next to it and fed a small amount of power into it the door groaned open just enough to let the armored Elites squeeze through. Unfortunately for the Grunts with their methane tanks and awkward stance, they were unable to fit through. Mallamee floated down the dark hall way and reached to his belt only to find two plasma grenades and a Plasma Pistol, knowing he had clipped an Energy Sword to his belt earlier. His fingers finally grasped around the metal hilt and he fired up the blade. Bright white light flooded the low hallways and they were able to make their way a little faster. A few dead bodies floated lifelessly through the air, small clouds of blood orbiting around the corpses. Another impact shuddered through the Assault Carrier's superstructure as a shot from their unknown enemy effortlessly blasted through their armor plating. After just a few minutes of navigation they arrived the lifepod docking stations. Every single one of them was still in it's position. Mallamee was about to lean around the corner to see how the area looked but one of his subordinates put a strong arm onto his shoulder and pushed him backwards.

> "Let us," one said behind him before floating forward in front of the Fleet Master.<br> "There is nothing to-," he said protesting but was cut-off by the sound of an Elite's head exploding in front of him. What had been inside of his cranium was now a cloud floating around and spraying against the walls around them. More shots crackled through the air, contacting with the Elites who were rushing out from behind cover to attack their superior foes. Mallamee pushed into the open hallway and saw the dark shapes firmly planted on the deck. Spheres of magnetically encased anti-matter sizzled around the Elites' ears and he realized their bleak position. Desperately searching for some way to get an upper hand, he saw the lifepod airlock and floated in. "Abandon ship!" he yelled out to the surprise of his surviving crewmembers. They saw that he meant what he said and disengaged the enemy. The last Elite in pulled a wounded comrade in behind him before Mallamee sealed the door and ejected themselves from the dying \_Sanctimonious Trinity\_. While the others tended to their terminal brother, the Fleet Master stood at the control panel deep in thought. At first he was going to bring up the preprogrammed



coordinates for High Charity but knew that that would send them straight to the hornet's nest. The last locations of the other fleets scrolled through his mind but contact had been slowly being lost one by one over the past few hours. The only other fleet he knew of was the one assaulting Earth but the retreat order was never responded to.

> "Whatever you decide, we will follow you," his XO said behind him. The SpecOps Elite walked forward in the narrow and dimly lit craft, his blue lights the only real distinguishing feature on him. <br> "I'm not sure you will like where I believe we must go. Our fleets are gone, High Charity has been captured, there is no one left to rescue usâ€¦except for the," his XO went so quiet that the XO had problems hearing him, "except for the Humans." The SpecOps snarled and withdrew. "Janamee, listen, if we do not go to Earth our Covenant and everything we have fought for will be for naught. The Humans, however weak and inferior, still have a military and the element of surprise."

> "I would prefer suicide over this option." Mallamee, almost instantly, held the hilt of his sword out to Kara' Janamee. They stood like this for a few seconds before Janamee extended his hand closed Mallamee's around the hilt. "If you believe this is what we should do, then I trust in your judgment." Mallamee nodded and inserted the coordinates to the Sol system. Darkness enveloped the lifepod as its Slipspace generator kicked in. The Fleet Master prayed that he had made the correct moveâ€¦ <br> "Their information was correct; the attack group destroyed their fleet with ease."

"Did any of them escape?" John asked, not turning around the face the Forerunner behind him. Rain fell in sheets against the patio and off in the distance lighting flashed for a split second.

> "A lifepod was able to get away, our sensors believed that it was a large piece of debris until its Slipspace generators activated." <br> "Did you at least get the coordinates?" he asked, making sure his frustration came through in his voice.

> "Yes, they are headed to the Sol system." <br> "There went what remained of our surprise." John turned around when he heard the door open to the large room he was standing in. Once occupied by the Prophet of Truth, he had claimed it for himself. Great chandeliers of a blue crystal hung in the middle of the incredibly vaulted ceilings, illuminating the room as if it was made of ice and illuminated itself. Four Forerunners, none of which were dressed in armor but instead a few layers of dark cloaks, walked in swiftly. Holding the highest ranks in the Forerunner military, or what had been assembled so far, these soldiers meant business whenever they arrived.

> "It will take time for us to rebuild our fleets, more than we originally expected. Our forge worlds were ravaged by the Flood to a point where all of their natural resources are behind recovery. Because of this, it will take many years before we will have enough resources to begin construction." Yet another blow in John's plan. <br> "Do what you have to; we'll continue the summoning process so that we will have more hands when we actually begin." They nodded and left the room along with the messenger. Using some of the most advanced technology the galaxy had ever seen, the Forerunners were able proverbially banish themselves into a parallel dimension until they were brought back when the Flood had starved to death. Time within this dimension was even more skewed than when inside Slipspace in the sense that they had been sealed off for maybe a few months when in reality it had been thousands of years. John still hadn't been able to get his mind around all of the things they were talking about nor did he ever expect to, but it was still fascinating

nonetheless. Someone cleared their throat from behind him and he looked out onto the balcony. Standing next to a few wet drapes was beautiful woman. Wearing some robes given to them by the Forerunners, she walked over to John, soaked straight through. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pushed herself against his armored body. "Things never work out how we want them to."  
> "Don't worry about it, it'll all be fine in the end." John just nodded, wondering if they would be outmaneuvered rather than outgunned.<p>

## 6. Caracas

### Chapter 6: Caracas

Stars suddenly appeared in the windows of the C709 Longsword Interceptor, replacing the dark blue sky that had been there just a few seconds before. Will felt his body become weightless and began floating in whatever direction his weight had been shifted towards before the loss of gravity. Out of the front window he saw the Super MAC station they were headed to, the Caracas, and hovering all around it were the remaining UNSC Marathon-class cruiser. Standing out, though, was the UNSC Tiberius, officially the largest UNSC vessel aside from the refitting and Super MAC stations. The other Spartans floated over to a wall full of weapon racks and began pulling out all of their equipment. Backpacks loaded with munitions, thigh pistol holders, load bearing vests maxed out with BR55 clips, and almost a dozen grenades; top brass wasn't interested in having a group of captured Elites tear through their brand new uniforms in front of their soldiers.

> "This is Juliet-Eight requesting final approach coordinates."<br> "\_Bearing niner-five, Juliet-Eight," \_the station replied back to the Longsword pilot. Will cinched the last straps on his backpack and loaded a round into his chamber but keeping the safety switched on. Gracefully dipping the wings of the craft back and forth to avoid the behemoths that surrounded the station, they finally saw an open hangar and came in on a final approach. Yellow lights led them in and the engines warmed the metal floor to a dark orange color before they shut off and the doors closed behind them. Gravity once again overtook the Humans inside and they settled to the ground to wait for the atmosphere to be returned to the hangar. This took a little over thirty seconds but once it had finished they rushed out and headed towards the bridge.

> "Remember, there will be more of them than us but we've got a company of ODSTs there as well. Keep your fingers around those triggers and watch their movements, you'll know when they're going to do something." It surprised Will how easily he could slip into the role of a leader but at the same time be a normal soldier. This feeling wasn't lost on his three comrades. Marines hurried back and forth through the hallways of the station and the concentration steadily increased as they came closer and closer to the bridge. They finally arrived at a short flight of stairs that was jam packed with UNSC personnel holding datapads in their hands and talking quickly to each other. Spotting the heavily armed Spartans they squeezed up against the railings and let them make their way through. Holding back the crowd of people was a squad of ODSTs. One of them walked over to Will and popped his helmet, rubbing his gloved hand through his short brown hair.<br> "It'd be idiotic for them to try anything with all of our men in there but you never know with those crazy bastards. The Admiral wanted you to take these in," he said pointing

to four eight-gauge M90 shotguns leaning up against an olive drab crate.

> "<em>Sweet!"<em>Chris said excitedly over their personal comm channel as they walked over and picked up the brand new weapons. Will hooked his BR55 onto a magnetic clip on the side of his backpack and pumped a shell into the chamber. Two Helljumpers unlocked the main door into the bridge and let the four go through before locking it again. Instead of humming with activity or filled with naval officers in their dress whites, the bridge was filled with ODS'T troops snugly fit into the space obviously not designed around supporting a firefight. Perfectly positioned out of the main window was the \_Tiberius\_, it's heavy guns glistening in the sunlight. Standing up on the slightly raised platform at the front of the room was Lord Krakeur, Lead Counselor on the UNSC's High Command. A few other lower ranking officers stood behind him, their sidearms uncharacteristically visible. The four Spartans stood on the overlooking walkway and stood rigid before being acknowledged by the Lord.

> "Please come down here," he said; his voice raspy and cracking. They walked past more ODS'Ts and stood facing a small door underneath the bleacher-like complex of computers that monitored the system. Sliding open silently, all of the Marines leveled their weapons at it as a squad of Elites walked out with guards surrounding them. The Elite in the front of the group was looking at the ground like the rest before he glanced upwards and saw the Spartans. His head whipped upwards and his mandibles opened wide. Lord Krakeur slowly looked over at the Spartans who also noticed this.<br> "What is your name and rank?" he asked, ignoring the Elites' response.

> "My name is Minor Fleet Master Husa' Mallamee and I am captain of the <em>Sanctimonious Trinity."<br> \_"Why have you come to Earth?"

> "Our fleet was ambushed and destroyed as well as the rest of the other Covenant fleets." People began talking loudly to each other, some disbelievingly and while others were optimistic.<br> "Who ambushed your fleet?"

> "I do not know, but I can assure you that it was no inf- Human," he quickly said, correcting himself, "ship, or at least no classification that I am aware of at this point in time."<br> "So you came here expecting your fleet to be waiting here?"

> "No, a retreat order had been issued by High Charity. It is standard protocol to affirm any new orders. This order was never responded to."<br> "Then you came here looking for mercy that you have never shown us?" Will noticed the Elites tense up and Mallamee seemed visibly agitated. He gripped his hand around the handle of the shotgun.

> "The Holy Ones have shown mercy to one of your own, the Demon, and he has destroyed our divine Covenant!" ODS'Ts started cheering but quickly stopped when they noticed that the officers were not happy at this news.<br> "What do you know about Spartan One-One-Seven?"

> "I do not know of this Spartan One-One-Seven."<br> "The Demon, as you call him."

> "He was captured on a planet in the Hydrocordatus system a little over two months ago. Shortly afterwards he intercepted a Human craft in Slipspace that contained one more Demon and a female Human like the others that we normally encounter. The Holy Ones tried to exert their influences over the Demons but the male, this, One-One-Seven, turned on us during a mission on a planet in the Trinity system, Coral I believe it was referred as over the Human communications. He was to retrieve an artifact but instead used himself and released the Gods from their slumber. This was all unbeknownst to the Holy Ones

who tasked him with leading the assault on Earth and taking command of one of our Planet Killers. During the battle, there was a short communication sent out that stated four Demons had boarded the ship and were threatening to commandeer the craft. Before anyone was able to respond, though, it jumped back to High Charity with the Demons aboard. I have no more knowledge of what transpired between then and now, but you may want to ask them," he stated, pointing towards the four Spartans, "Because they were the ones aboard the craft." Lord Krakeur turned to the Spartans who were still rigidly facing the Elites.<br> "Why weren't we informed of this?" he snapped. Will turned to face the Lord and replied.

> "Sir, immediately after returning we were ordered to the surface to help with the defenses. There was no time." This answer seemed to suffice and he turned back to the Elites.<br> "You must attack before the demon can build his fleet and bolster his ranks, you have the upper hand." This sudden outburst shocked the Humans gathered in the bridge and many leveled their rifles at the alien. "I'm sorry, but the more time that is spent doing nothing is time that is being lost."

> "If you haven't seemed to notice, our fleets aren't exactly in fighting condition no thanks to your comrades." Lord Krakeur suddenly seemed tired and beat down and Will could see that this set of bad news was already getting to him. "We have no choice but to wait, if we attack now, he'll destroy us and then counter-strike a defenseless Earth." The Lord walked away from the platform and all of the soldiers in the room saluted as he exited through a door at the side of the bridge.<p>

"Are we supposed to just sit here and wait around until John decides to do something?" Linda asked almost rhetorically. She set her helmet down onto a small metal table in their room and stood looking out a circular window.

> "We're not exactly in a position to just order around the UNSC Linda," Will replied, trying to keep her reasonable. He saw her shoulders droop ever so slightly and he knew she had already seen his reasoning.<br> "It's justâ€¦the longer we wait the less chance there is of saving him, that's all."

> "There is no chance, you've seen what he did, there's no hope for him, no matter how much you want to believe it." He sat down on his bunk, the metal creaking under his heavy weight but luckily holding him. The emotions he felt toward John were ever changing. One moment he would like to put a bullet through his head while the next he hoped that they would reunite and put everything behind them. Will knew none of this could ever happen; the UNSC would put their greatest savior to death and hope they will learn from their mistakes.<br> "Don't try and convince me of something you don't believe yourself," Linda said, catching him off guard. She turned around and leaned up against the window wall. "How long do you think we'll have to wait? We're not exactly getting any younger here." Will had noticed that Linda's once perfect skin had begun to look a little more creased and small lines were forming around her mouth.

> "That's for them to decide because unfortunately we're at their mercy, but that's not new."<p>

## 7. Mark VII

### Chapter 7: Mark VII

"\_Spartan Oh-Four-Three, Lord Krakeur has requested your presence in

his quarters immediately\_." The voice over the intercom startled Will and he quickly sat up in his bed. He looked over at Linda who was wide awake in the other bunk.

> "What's so important at this time in the morning?" she asked.<br> "Not sure, but I'll know soon enough." Will got out of his bed and put on a pair of grey and black nylons before leaving the room. Only a few lights were on in the hallways and other than two sleepy eyed techs changing shifts, he didn't encounter anyone. It took about ten minutes to make it to the Lord's quarters and he was brought in almost immediately. Krakeur was standing around a large holotank in the center of his room, ornately disguised with rich wood and polished brass. Three other officers were sitting at couches with holopads and piles of empty coffee cups. Will saluted stiffly and waited for the Lord and other officers to acknowledge his presence.

> "At ease, please come over here, I need to talk with you."<br> "Yes sir," he replied and followed Krakeur as he walked to his desk and sat down behind it. He smoothly motioned for Will to sit down and the Spartan obeyed, sliding into the plush black leather chair.

> "It seems that the war claimed one last group of casualties. There were two transports leaving TL-Eight-One, the final training facility for the Spartan-IIIs. A small Covenant assault group arrived there and was quickly wiped out, but they destroyed one of the transports. We originally were expecting about two hundred Spartan-IIIs, now we're down to a little under a hundred. That's not what I wanted to talk to you about though. With a new threat on the horizon and the fact that both sides are in no position to start a war, we've been turning towards keeping our military geniuses around until we need them. The UNSC is considering putting their best strategists into a cryogenic hibernation and they've also decided to do the same with the Spartans. But before they do, they want to give you the Mark VII armor in case you are thawed out and thrown into battle immediately." All of this hit Will at once and he vainly tried to process all of the information. He decided to start with the most pertinent thing first.<br> "The Mark VII? But aren't the Spartan-IIIs just using an upgraded version of the Mark VI?"

> "Well yes, that's true, but we started development on the Mark VII almost immediately after the Mark VI was issued. It's a departure from the tech that we've used in previous iterations, that's for sure."<br> "This is a lot to try and sort throughâ€¦"

> "I understand, that's why I decided to tell you as soon as I got the news. The Spartan-IIIs are already at the cryo-center waiting for the four of you to meet up with them. A transport will be here around 0900 hours to pick you up and take you down to the surface."<br> "Thank-you sir," Will said as he stood up and saluted. The Spartan exited the room but paused and turned around. "May I ask a question?"

> "Go ahead."<p>

"Are you going too?" Krakeur looked down at his desk with a small smile across his face. Tapping his hand on the wood twice he looked back up.

> "I've seen enough death for a million lifetimes. That's not to say I wouldn't like to come back and help defend our race, it's justâ€¦" he trailed off, shaking his head. What he was trying to say couldn't be put into words but Will understood this.<br> "Thank-you sir, I'll see you on the other side."

> "I'll be waiting." As he left the room, he knew it would be the last time he saw the Lord.<p>

"Come on, get up," Will said, pulling the blankets off of Linda. She squinted around the room a little before swinging her legs off the edge of the bunk and putting her bare feet on the metal flooring.

> "What do you need?"<br> "Start getting your stuff together, I'll explain it in a minute." He pulled a single bag out from an otherwise empty shelf under his bunk and began grabbing different pairs of PT gear and BDUs that they would never use. "Brass has decided we're too valuable to just let rot away so they're taking all those personnel they deem indispensable and are putting them into a cryo-freeze until they're needed again. But that's not the most interesting thing, the Mark-VII armor is ready." It was rare for Will to show any kind of real emotion in his voice, not to mention excitement to the point where he was talking so fast it was almost impossible to keep up.

> "What? Are you serious?"<br> "Would I lie about something like this?" She looked at his bright face.

> "Oh my godâ€|this isâ€|wow."<br> "I know, I'm going to wake up Chris and Kat." He zipped up his half full bag before leaving their room and going across the hallway. Inside the dark room he pressed his hand on a soft blue panel and the lights flicked on. The two Spartans stirred but didn't try and fight the blinding light.

> "Need something?" Chris asked sleepily.<br> "Get packed up, we're leaving in a few hours."

> "Wha-?" he said but Will had already gone back to his room. He sat down onto his bunk, letting himself take everything in, or at least trying. Glancing over at a built in clock, he saw it read 0545.<br> "What do you expect us to do for three hours?" Linda asked.

Red flames roared around the Pelican as it dropped through the atmosphere. Shaking violently, the Spartans held on tight to the small handles placed around their seats and waited for the hell around them to disappear. Blue plasma burned around the windows before slowly dissipating and being replaced by white clouds of steam that billowed for hundreds of feet behind the red hot craft.

> "That's always fun," Chris said sarcastically, popping his helmet off and looking out the window and at Australia steadily growing closer by the second. The wing of the Pelican dipped to the starboard and the land below them filled the entirety of the window while the other windows were filled with a deep blue. Down below, thick columns of smoke still rose up from what remained of Sydney's downtown.<br> "Damnâ€|they must've had it hard down thereâ€|" Kat commented as she looked down at the scene below them. Their Pelican leveled out again and quickly descended down the UNSC's secure zone surrounding the monstrous complex of buildings. Piles of Human and Covenant wreckage were scattered around the landing zones in makeshift piles, some parts still smoldering. A few thick columns of acrid smoke rolled into the air lazily and putting a grey haze on everything. The four Spartans walked out of the Pelican with their gear on their backs and in their hands. Dried blood was pooled around the landing pad their were on although Marines about a hundred feet from them were spraying the concrete down to remove the evidence of their fallen comrades. One Marine came running over to them and saluted before grabbing his breath.

> "Sirs, please follow me." He turned back around and the four Spartans followed after him quickly. Inside the building, some lights still hadn't been replaced while others flickered on and off, briefly illuminating the damaged hallways. A few engineers sat reconnecting conduits or shoring up sagging sections of the building but other than their intermittent appearances, no other personnel were visible. "I'm sorry about the mess; we've been trying to get the main sections up and running and haven't had time to work on the less important

areas."<br> "Its fine," Will said quickly. The Marine looked back quickly before continuing forward. They arrived at a miraculously undamaged elevator after walking for a few more minutes.

> "This is as far as I go, good luck," he said and left them as the heavy doors opened up. The four of them walked into the elevator and felt it sag down a little under their weight. There were no buttons inside and after a few seconds the doors closed automatically and it quickly descended. Lasting for only about ten seconds, the Spartans felt the elevator slow down before stopping completely. With the doors opening back up again, they exited out and were taken back by the sudden change in scenery. Instead of the dull grey metal that was the norm in UNSC hallways, this area was instead made of a self-illuminating white metal that, after staring at it for a while, seemed as if it moved like gentle wave. About fifty down from them, the hallway was bisected by another one where people moved quickly back and forth, none paying any attention to the Spartansâ€|except for one person. Dressed in a full black set of scrubs complimented by a grey lab coat, the young doctor was radiant as he hurried towards them.<br> "I'm sorry I couldn't make it any sooner, slight delay with the group before you. I'm Dr. Lincoln, uh, shall we?" he asked, pointing behind him his thumb. The four Spartans started walking but he stayed in front of them. "We're going to first give you a chemical cocktail. Nothing more than some drugs to help keep your cells from being damaged during your 'stay'." They walked into the crowded hall and went past only three doors before swiping a card attached to his wrist in front of a small blue square. The door opened silently and they walked in. The room was a fairly large one with clusters of chairs all facing towards a large set of cabinets and refrigerators that covered the entire wall. Lincoln motioned to the first group of chairs and the Spartans sat down in them as he grabbed four vials of a milky liquid from a small freezer. Knowing the drill a million times, they all popped the small hatch on their right forearm that accessed the needle that would insert into their veins at the same time. He slid the needle into the receptor and squeezed the liquid into their bloodstream. The icy liquid shocked Will and he looked over at the doctor. "Sorry, it needs to stay cool until the last second," he said as he injected Linda with the cocktail. Finishing up Kat's dose they got up and left the room. "This is probably going to be the best part for you guys." Arriving at a set of double doors, he swiped his card again and they opened much slower than the last one. Four dummies were positioned inside of the room in a small arc. "Meet the Mark VII armor."

## 8. Into the Night

### Chapter 8: Into the Nightâ€|

"Essentially, the Mark VII is made out of a hybrid of the metal that this complex is made of, the hybrid version making it lighter and stronger," Dr. Lincoln said as he walked around the four suits. "Most of the hardware has remained the same physically, although there have been some amazing technological advancements applied. The crystal layer is still present but with a more conductive liquid and your OS is capable of monitoring all of the radio bands, target over two thousand individual enemy units, the thousands of other operations keeping your suit running, and just about anything else you could ask of it. This suit needs no AI, it can do it all on its own." Will walked into the room and examined the lifeless Mark VII standing rigid. No major design changes had been implemented between the Mark

VI and this new version, although the lines seemed smoother and, surprisingly, the actual metal plates seemed thinner. But other parts of the armor were obviously new. Instead of the olive green color that all the other iterations were painted, this version was the same grayish-white metal that surrounded them and the face mask was no longer gold but instead was the ice blue color that the ODST facemasks had.

> "What's with the color?" he asked, somewhat alarmed.<br> "It's a smart metal, it'll sense it's surroundings and shift it's color to match the environment you're in. There are also some preset camo schemes that are basics like forest, desert, urban, and arctic."

> "Incredible!" Kat whispered as she ran her hand along the smooth metal.<br> "I'll get the techs to help you change over," Lincoln said and he left the room quickly. Will popped his helmet off and rubbed his free hand through his hair.

> "I don't know, it just doesn't seem like such a big leap over the Mark VI, unless there are more things that he never told us." Lincoln walked in with a small group of technicians trailing behind him. They immediately moved over to the Spartans and directed them to special stations outfitted with robotic arms to aid in the removal of their armor. One by one the Mark VI was disassembled and placed on straining tables. The Spartans were stripped down to the thin black suit they wore under the crystal layer and even that needed to be removed. It was an awkward period of time as the four Spartans turned away from each other and put the new, more padded, under suits on. The Spartans were then led over to the suits and there the techs started to dismantle them until all that was left was black layer that housed the hydrostatic gel and crystal AI layer. They were handed the suit, put it on, and zipped the back and crotch up. After that, they were handed a part of their armor one by one. Boots, gauntlets, thigh pads, all of it was new and alien to Will but at the same time it was as if he had worn it since he was a child. In almost no time, the techs handed him his new helmet and left the room. Shifting it uneasily between his hands, Will walked over to Mark VI. As he moved over there, he was surprised at the lightness of the armor and how nimble he felt just moving a few feet in a straight line. Unlike the previous versions where, even with all of the servos and the natural strength of the Spartans, they could still feel the heft of the armor, the Mark VII was almost weightless on their bodies. Will set his new helmet down and looked at the now old looking Mark VI. He noticed all of the pits in the metal, the paint scratches, burn marks, and every other assault it had withstood. Setting his hand on it, he said goodbye to it and popped the Mark VII helmet on. Fitting snugly but incredibly comfortably with the extra padding they put inside of it, diagnostics started running instantaneously. Most were over within a few seconds and were able to be run in the background while the major ones ran right in front of his face. Instead of the usual set-up that floated in the air, his vision was completely blank as the computer checked its targeting software. Suddenly, the familiar blue HUD winked on and Will glanced over it to see that there were no noticeable changes.<br> "If you guys are all set, we're ready for you in the cryo-chamber," Dr. Lincoln said, leaning in through the door. Will looked at the others who were looking back at him.

> "Let's do this."<p>

"We'll be doing a slow frost to prevent any long term cell damage but you won't notice the difference because we've added an anesthetic to the normal liquid you always take." Lincoln's face contorted his face as they were walking while he wracked his brain for anything else he



needed to tell them. "Regarding thawing out, it will most likely be a quick and hectic one. I most likely won't be around when that happens so I can't really tell you what'll be going on." Lincoln swiped a card in front of another reader and walked into the large room. Arranged in rows of ten each, cryo-tubes were positioned back to back against each other at a slight angle. Most of the tubes were frosted over, but a few had small open spots on the glass that afforded a view of a slumbering Spartan encased in their brand new Mark VII. At the end of four of the rows were open tubes with technicians readying up the concoction that the Spartans would need to drink to prevent their internal organs from collapsing in on themselves. Lincoln stopped at the beginning of the tubes and left them to their own devices. Will noticed Kat's silence during the recent events and opened up a private comm channel with her.

> "Are you alright?"<br> "\_Yeah, I'm fine, it's just a lot to take in."

> <em>"I understand, see you on the other side."

> "<em>Same." <em>Will walked up to the technician who was standing behind a small cart. Bottles of different chemicals were sitting on top of it and they had apparently all been mixed into a potent smelling solution. He popped his helmet off and set it down onto an open space on the table and downed the horrendous tasty liquid. Grabbing his helmet, he put it back on and slid into the tube, already feeling the anesthetic kicking in. At the same time, his lungs began to wheeze and his stomach turned as the chemicals began to expand to fill the gaps. The door closed in front of him a whistled loudly as the seal pressurized and a thick cloud of fog swirled around his feet, chilling his body. Within a few more seconds his neck loosened up and his neck slumped backwards.

## 9. First Strike

### Chapter 9: First Strike

30 Years Laterâ€¦|

Blackness filled Captain Geraldo's view as his ship, the UNSC \_Keyes, \_which also doubled for the \_Keyes' class flagship, floated in orbit around a small planet that was scheduled to begin colonization. He leaned back in his chair and counted the seconds as he waited for the transports to arrive. Trying to find something to keep himself busy, he tapped a few images on a small holographic displayed next to him and brought up a general overview of his ship. Following the typical UNSC design elements for cruisers, the ship's lines harkened back to the pre-Covenant War but were still very modern and sleek. Offering a relatively thing profile, it would be hard for an enemy, whoever it may be, to land a direct broadside shot on them while still offering ample space for the hundreds of missile pods and heavy machine guns on each side. Located in the front was a retractable MAC cannon that had a much increased rate of fire thanks to it's fast loader and dedicated power plant located within the bowels of the ship. The colors on the \_Keyes \_contrasted greatly as the outside was a dark grey color to help blend in with the dead of space while the inside was the self-illuminating white metal that had been adopted by the UNSC as it's default building material of choice. Created from years of experimentation and augmented by Covenant technology, the metal, whose name and make-up were still classified, increased their durability a thousand fold over Titanium-A and it's many hybrids. All of the systems on the ship reported in and everything was working in

perfect condition. Geraldo closed the diagram and got out of his chair. A row of computer consoles lined the two walls of the bridge and most were manned by the ship's command personnel who kept track of all the ship's systems while others controlled the heavier weapons during combat. In front of the Captain were the two pilots of the cruiser who floated above the slanted window at the front of the bridge and main section of the ship itself. Captain Geraldo was about to leave the bridge when a few of the consoles beeped at their operators, including his own station. The dropped down section in the center of the bridge came alive as holotanks started producing images of the ship and its immediate surroundings.

> "Slipspace rupture detectedâ€|another one!" someone called out.<br> "I've got a third!" another reported.

> "Is it the transports?" Geraldo asked, hoping it was so they could start doing something.<br> "No UNSC registry, could be civilian, hailing nowâ€|" the communications officer reported from his console in the sunken down area. "Nothing."

> "Shields up to fifty percent and bring all automated weapons to Alert Level One and warm up all of the others," The Captain said while pointing to those who were responsible for those actions. He went over to his chair and tapped a small button on it causing it to compress together and disappear into a small compartment under the deck. The holotanks around him powered up and showed the same images as the one behind him. "Bring us around to face the Slipspace ruptures." Stars scrolled to the starboard as the nose of the ship positioned itself. A soft hum filled the air as the two main engines came to life and the six small maneuver engines followed suit. His eyes scanned the darkness in front of him for any sign of the ships but didn't see anything. He was about to change the cameras when golden tracers started to fly out in front of the ship. The two 120mm cannons on the nose of the cruiser had opened fire on something.

"Show me what they're seeing." A small box popped up on his display. Their thermal sensors had located three incredibly hot sources of heat. "What the hell...?" Before he could finish, dark blue lances of light impacted on the front of their ship causing the golden shields to flare up. "Bring shields to full power! All personnel to their battle stations! Scramble all fighters and power up every weapon we've got!" The tracers suddenly began filling the darkness as the guns that had a clear view of the heat sources unloaded. A few streams of gunfire were blue plasma rounds that were the first step in transitioning their weapons from projectile based to energy based. A relatively small round, 30mm, was encased with a cloud of plasma that was created inside of the round as it raced towards it's target. While nowhere near the same level of sophistication as the Covenant's weapons, these rounds are still the most effective weapon in the UNSC's arsenal, second only to the NOVA II. The volume of incoming fire continued to increase as the <em>Keyes</em> began maneuvering out of the way. More turrets came online and salvos of missiles streaked away from their pods. Shots continued to impact on their shields more frequently causing the Captain to begin to get nervous. "Relay a message to HighComm, just say anything to them but make sure they don't send reinforcements," he said desperately. Alarms began blaring in the bridge as the shields suddenly dropped below twenty-five percent.

> "Sir! I'm detecting massive energy spikes!" Geraldo looked out at where the fire was coming from and saw balls of energy glowing on the bows of their enemy.<p>

"The assault was a complete success, none of our ships were damaged and the cruiser was completely annihilated although it was able to

send off a message before it's cores detonated." John looked back up at the Forerunner officer who was standing in the entrance to his apartment.

> "Alright. I hope they were able get a copy of the message though, I'd like to look over it."<br> "Of course, I'll bring it to you as soon as I can." He nodded and the officer left him. A sudden burden felt like it had fallen on his shoulders and he braced himself on a nearby table. His hand migrated to the gauntlet on his right arm, the object that had at least kept him and others around him from aging, if not making them younger.

> "It's my time nowâ€|" he said, trying to reaffirm to him his actions.<p>

"These recent events are most disturbing. It has been over twenty-five years since last encountered a Covenant ship and it was dead in space. We must face the facts that our greatest fear might've just come trueâ€|"

> "Let's not be too hasty to rush to judgment. Pirates have been known to reverse engineer Covenant tech and use it on their own ships."<br> "Let's also not downplay these events! If we decide to not to take some kind of a precaution, we will find ourselves in the same situation we found ourselves when Harvest fell." The four highest ranking UNSC officers stood on a small balcony overlooking the shimmering blue Pacific. Short green grass had been planted in two large squares that were surrounded by stone squares. Three of the officers stood in a loose triangle while the fourth, only in his late thirties and with dark skin, leaned over the balcony.

> "So you think we should tell the colonies that a new and much more dangerous enemy is prowling space?"<br> "You think we shouldn't tell them, don't know!" The two officers arguing with each other moved closer and looked as if they would resort to blows.

> "I'm appalled you aren't making the connection here. We have always been living in the shadow of an enemy far more sophisticated, more deadly, and more elusive than the Covenant. The Forerunners are making their first move; we'd better make a counter move." The others looked over at the young officer who had left his position on the balcony.<br> "You're both crazy," the one officer who still believed it was pirates said, "they're not interested in us or they would've attacked years ago."

> "They didn't have a fleet, or their fleet was so small it could be defeated just by sheer numbers alone. How long has it taken to rebuild our fleet since the Covenant attacked? Two decades at least but now we number in five digits. If you blow this off, we will be broadsided by an attack the likes we have never seen. Imagine, an entire hive world dead because they had ten ships trying to defend the entire system. But if we bring at least the Navy up to full alert status we can at least attempt to prevent a massacre if there is one."<br> "Is that all you are suggesting?" The young officer didn't respond immediately. Instead, he went and leaned back onto the balcony and thought for a few moments.

> "Wake up the Spartans."<br> "Johnson, you'd better be right about this."

Private Harris was making his daily rounds to check on the vitals of the Spartans when he heard a rhythmic beeping on his computer. Finishing up on the tube he was at, he headed into the small office at the front of the room and looked at his computer screen. A small message icon was flashing on the lower left hand corner. He tapped it once and the sender information and subject slid out in a bar to the right. Re-reading the info over and over, he opened up the full

message and read through it.

> "Holy shit!" The Private had just received orders to wake the Spartans up. Closing the file, he plopped down in his chair and rolled over to the master control panel for the cryo tubes and navigated through the different layers until he was able to run the program to thaw down every tube at once. Tapping "Run", a small progress bar appeared and immediately ticked to 1 but the timer read at least three hours before they could actually be woken up and brought back to consciousness. There was nothing left for Harris to do except sit and wait.<p>

## 10. Getting Reacquainted

### Chapter 10: Getting Reacquainted

Voices swirled around the darkness that Will floated in.

> "<em>All clear over here! We're good on my end! A-O-K on this side!</em>" <em>He tried to focus on the sounds but would lose them each and ever time. Footsteps echoed through his head making it sound like thousands of soldiers were marching around him. Some appendage of his moved and the blackness suddenly swirled in a million directions at once causing his stomach to try and expel whatever contents it had left in it. Taking a breath, it came up short and he started coughing violently. This sudden action jolted the rest of his body and he slowly opened his eyes up. Although it was like he Vaseline smeared all over his face, he tried to look around and get his bearings. A dark shape walked past him and his head followed it, slumping to his left shoulder. Frantically blinking, the blurriness didn't go away and he labored to move his right arm up to his face mask. Sliding across the blue visor, four smears of clear vision appeared where his fingers cut through the layer of frost that had formed on it. Resting for a few seconds, he took more of the frost off, opening up a decent section of viewable space. Another figure moved past him but stopped just to his right. They tapped their hand on the glass in front of him and he made some kind of a movement. The figure turned to their left and raised a hand high into the air. Suddenly the door in front of him swung upwards and the fog that circled around him poured out of the bottom. Warm air penetrated his suit and he suddenly began to feel rejuvenated and more awake. Another coughing attack hit him and he hurriedly removed his helmet to vomit out the thick grey fluid that had been sitting inside of his chest since he went into the tube. He slowly stood up to his full height and looked around the room. Other Spartans were already standing around talking to each other and checking out their new armor. Will felt a little weak and sat down on the edge of his tube and took deep breaths.

> "WE NEED A CRASH CART OVER HERE!" someone yelled out. Everyone looked over at a tube on the other side of Will's row. He got up and slowly made his way over a doctor rushed over and a few more followed her with the crash cart. Lying on the ground was a Spartan without her helmet on.<br> "She seemed fine when she got out but suddenly stopped breathing and collapsed," one of the technicians said. A few other Spartans hurried over and started to pull her chest plate off so that they could perform CPR. Trying to get a better look, Will threaded through the others standing around and caught a glimpse of her face. Blonde hair spread out from her slightly blue face and his heart stopped. It was Kat. The doctor started chest compressions on her while the others warmed up the defibrillator. They knelt down and the doctor cut patches in her under suit to reveal bare skin. Rubbing some conductor gel on, she grabbed the two paddles and placed them

onto her chest.

> "Clear!" People stood back as Kat's body arched into the air as 2,500 volts arced through her body. The doctor leaned back as another checked her pulse.<br> "No pulse." They charged the defibrillator once more and fired it. Kat's body jolted again and the doctor pulled the paddles away. "There's a pulse, but it's faint."

> "Alright, get a gurney, she needs to go to the medical wing immediately!" One of the other doctors pulled a gurney from a storage locker and brought it over to them. The Spartans who pulled her chest plate off bent down, picked her up and placed her on the gurney. The doctors pushed it out of the room leaving the Spartans behind in disbelief.<p>

"I've heard about the events earlier today. The doctors would like me to tell you that she should be okay and will be back in a few weeks. But now we need to get to business, the reason we brought all of you back." A young officer stood at the center of a bowl like room. The Spartans, all ninety five of them, were arranged in a crescent shape around a holotank imbedded in the floor. Stepping back, the officer powered it up and a video began to play. "Thirty-six hours ago the UNSC \_Keyes \_was stationed above Esterea, a newly proposed colony. While it was waiting for the transports to arrive, three enemy ships jumped into the system." The video fast-forwarded to the thermal image of the three generators. "The Keyes engaged the ships but was quickly overwhelmed and destroyed but not before sending us this video and may-day messages. At first we believed it might be a group of pirates with modified Covenant weapons but that was quickly proved to be false. Lieutenant General Johnson recommended your re-activation as a precaution as well as bringing the UNSC Navy up to full alert status."

> "Sir, is it safe to compare this incident to that of Harvest?" one of the Spartans asked.<br> "That would be a good comparison, yes, although we are not going to make the same mistake twice. It's clear that again, we are outgunned, and, in this situation, out numbered, so because of that, we are not sending any recon pickets nor will we send a task force to try and eliminate this threat because we know it is there."

> "Was there any communication between the two groups that possibly could've provoked this?"<br> "As far as we know, no messages were received from the enemy vessels, although they could've been on an entirely different band or even some other form of communication that we have no way of receiving, although that is incredibly unlikely." Will watched the video as it looped through in fast forward. The attack was so basic, nothing to show John's superiorityâ€¦flaunt his strengthâ€¦nothing. It just didn't feel \_right. \_"If there are any more questions I'd like to take this time to get you caught up on what's happened since we last left you." A small timeline appeared and the first marker zoomed in. "In 2560, General Cassel led a small insurrection from the moons of Titus V. Nothing really came out of it and his support quickly dwindled making it possible for basic Spec Ops missions to cause the most damage. That was the first time we considered waking up at least a few of you. All was quiet on western front for a few years until 2569. A rather large group of planets declared themselves outside of UNSC control. In response, we mobilized the largest naval armada since the Covenant-Human war. Unfortunatelyâ€¦a show of force wasn't enough to avoid a conflict and our newest classes of ships engaged their ragtag fleet. The conflict was essentially a space based operation with the only real troop to troop engagements consisting of boarding parties and one fight on a moon. Again, we considered waking all of you up but backed off at the

last minute. The last major event that I'd like to mention, although it doesn't necessarily pertain to you directly, is the test detonation of the NOVA II in 2579. Increasing the yield a hundred fold over the NOVA I, we were able to completely obliterate a planet that had been glassed by the Covenant. Now that we've got you caught up on the important events, let's go take a look at your new weaponry." Chatter between the Spartans suddenly broke out over their personal comm channels. Some were speculating at what they would be using while others were just excited about getting new toys to play with. Will ignored what they were saying and went back to his own thoughts about the ambush at Esterea. He got up with the rest and Linda appeared out of nowhere at his side.

> "Was there something-."<br> "Yeah, it wasn't what I was expecting," he said, cutting her off mid sentence.

> "Alright, I was just making sure."<p>

"I'd like to introduce you to the BR55 Mark II," the officer yelled out in the hot afternoon sun. All of the Spartans had gathered around, their armor taking on an unusual sand and metal color to help blend in with the firing range's environment. Most of them, while yearning to fight, were also curious about the world around them. Every once in a while a loud roar would echo off in the distance and they would crane their necks upward to get a glance of some fighter or transport.

> "Using a KAT 9.5x40mm round, this is now the third deadliest weapon in the UNSC's small arms arsenal, next to the M22 SAMSSM Rocket and the SRSB70-S1 AM rifle. Three modes of fire for the weapon, semi, three-round burst, and full automatic. The clip has been expanded to forty-two rounds and the scope is now an integrated 3x smart-link. It has also become the standard weapons platform for the UNSC," the lieutenant from inside said as he set the Mark II down and grabbed another rifle. "This is the BR55 MkII SAW based off of the BR55 MkII weapon. Instead of being a bullpup design, the magazine has been upgraded to a one hundred round drum located in front of the trigger and grip. Other than the required mechanical changes, the SAW variant retains it's cousins profile except for a longer barrel and modified flash suppressor. Now, I will go back to the BR55â€¦" he said, trailing off as he picked it back up again, "the weapon has many open slots for modifications that include a higher powered scope, threads to attach a suppressor on the barrel, extendable buttstock, and an underslung M290 grenade launcher." The lieutenant then went over the new weapons that were essentially just newer versions of those they had used in 2556. They were then invited to try out the new weapons to get a feel for them. Will stepped forward to a low ledge and grabbed the BR55. Placing it in his shoulder, it felt no different than the MkI but once he fired it, all similarities went out the window. Each round felt like it packed a much heavier punch while at the same time staying completely controllable, with the spread growing no larger than nickel. It also had taken on a more guttural sound when it fired, and when ten of them were shooting at once, it became utterly deafening. Replacing a magazine, Will flicked it onto "Auto" and held the trigger down. The time between each shot was fractionally slower than with the burst, but the auto made up for it's lost time by plowing through the time in between each burst. Like before, it stayed right in Will's shoulder and the spread grew only to the size of a quarter. He stepped away from the table just as Linda passed by him. Giving her a quick thumbs-up, she grabbed the SRSB70 and slid her left arm parallel to the rifle's barrel. Hooking up the fiber optic cable to her right wrist, she zoomed in on the furthest target and fired off a shot. The round screamed through the

air, it's small fins keeping it true and straight, and shredded the target. A hot casing flew into the air and before it had hit the ground she popped off another shot on a target about thirty meters to the left of her first shot. All of the other Spartans stopped what they were doing as she lowered the rifle and looked at the Lieutenant.

> "Sir, is there any way to place a target further out? I'd like to test the full range on this."<br> "Of course, I'll get one of the field cadres to place a new one out."

> "I'm not sure you'll have enough room for the distance I'm thinking." He turned around and looked in amazement.<br> "Where do you suggest?" Sweat poured down his tan face and his eyes followed Linda's finger as it pointed out to the blue water that shimmered in the early evening. "I'll see what I can do."

Three kilometers out in the harbor, a dark grey boat bobbed in the water. Back on the shore, Linda was lying in the warm sand, the sniper rifle up against her face mask. Her suit had taken on the golden color of the ground and her under suit had even changed it's hue slightly to become less obvious. She slid one round into the chamber and charged the bolt. Popping into full zoom, she held her breath and figured out the rhythm of the boat. Sitting on top was an old Marine helmet that had been lying around, replaced by the new full face mask ones that were now standard issue for all UNSC soldiers, not just the ODSs and Spartans. Her finger pressed against the trigger and she fired off a shot just as the boat was coming back up. Sparks showered into the air as the helmet was torn in half and fell into the water. The men on the boat leapt up and looked in amazement. Standing back up, Linda was greeted by a round of applause from the two hundred plus people who had come to watch the shot.

> "Nice job! Incredible! Don't want to get on her bad side!" people called out to her. Smiling from behind her mask, she had no idea what to do.<br> "I think we've got enough time to give you guys an introduction to the UNSC's new vehicles," the Lieutenant said, extending his hand towards a large hangar that was shadowed by the skyscrapers that housed the UNSC's top officials. Inside, six vehicles were arranged in no particular order. Most of them resembled their predecessors in spirit but other than design features, everything had changed. The first place they stopped at was the replacement for the Scorpion MBT. "This is the M900 Viper MBT. Featuring two twin 120mm cannons and two 7.62mm APT, this is a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield." Sporting a lower profile and sleeker design, the Viper was almost the same size as the Scorpion, it also still had the four independent tread pods and space for Marines to jump on and catch a ride. "Over here, you can see the M13 Puma LRV. This variant is fitted with the M41 7.62MM LAAG gun like the Warthog but the Puma has a higher top speed, better traction, and room for five, four passengers plus a gunner." The Puma had a hard top that could apparently be removed due to the presence of clips around the four main supports. On either side of the vehicle, just in front of the LAAG were two seats that had been placed with their backs angled to the main passenger compartment in a way that they could help protect the sides and rear of the vehicle. No other main changes had made that altered it drastically from the Warthog. The next addition was the M52 Mongoose LPV. Essentially a toughened up ATV, it had room for two passengers and had no visible weapons mounted on it though the lieutenant hinted at the fact that some of the riders used their sidearms while riding around. Near the rear of the hangar were the two largest vehicles.

> "This is the AD-10 Dagger. Originally designed as a small

outer-atmospheric fighter, it's role changed during development until it was brought into the role of a fast reconassault gunship. Capable of carrying five passengers and a two member crew, the Dagger can insert squads into hot territory at high speeds. Carrying two wing mounted 70mm chainguns and a deployable rocket pod underneath the fuselage, it can pack an incredible amount of punch." The five seats were arranged like a "V" around the relatively thin fuselage, two on each side with the fifth facing the rear. Looking remarkably like a Pelican, the cockpit was a closed canopy with two winged doors. From their, the two wings swept back over the passengers, while the two engines were located just over the fuselage and pointed back towards the two elevators and rudder. The last thing they looked at was the D78-TC/VC Hawk. A new version of the Pelican, the Hawk didn't have very many designs changes to it other than sleeker lines and new motors that provided more thruster but were quieter. One of the only major changes was the addition of two doors on either side of the passenger compartment that allowed for easy disembarking or for snipers or others to fire out of in helping defend the ship. Ruby rays of light spread across the Pacific Ocean as the Spartans made their way back to their quarters on their first hours in 2856.

## 11. Training

### Chapter 11: Training

Heavy rain fell on the Spartans as they crouched next to a pile of rubble. Across the street Will could see shapes moving in the haze but held his fire to conceal his position."\_Looks like four of them, not sure where the others are." \_Linda had found a perfect spot to hide up in the miniature town that had been created for training exercises like this. Composed mostly of insta-crete and wooden buildings, the rubber rounds they were using had pockmarked the structures from past engagements. A single shot rang beat out the thunderous downpour and Will waited for Linda's confirmation.

> "<em>Positive kill, I'm moving, you're on your own for a minute or so<em>." He looked back at the other Spartans who's suits had blended in almost perfectly with the blown out building. Their heads moved about, always alert for a single sign of movement.

> "Chris, report in."<br> "\_I'm here, my fireteam is moving down the west side of the town to head of their squad\_."

> "Wait at the nearest building, we're going to be moving in a second and will need you to stay stationary in case we get into some trouble."<br> "\_Affirmative."\_ Will closed the comm channel and motioned for his squad to move up onto him. He looked down the street for the nearest portion of cover. Spotting a small alley that was only open to the street, he pointed to it with his hand and sprinted towards it. Geysers of water sprayed into the air as his powerful legs, coupled with the Mark VII, pounded into the street and the deep puddles that had formed. Reaching into his wet backpack, he pulled out the fiber optic cable he had tossed in there and hooked up one end of it to his helmet and stored the other part of it into his load bearing vest and checked down the street as the last of his fireteam arrived behind him. Crouching down, he started to move down the street slowly, his rifle pressed into his shoulder and his eyes flicking back and forth. Drops of water poured down his visor and he wiped his muddy gauntlet over it unconsciously, smearing dirt across it.

> "Dammit, keep moving ahead until you reach the fork, I'll catch up."<br> "Aye sir," Spartan-490 responded and they moved ahead



without him. Will found another safe place to stop and popped his helmet off. Splashing water onto the visor, he quickly cleaned it off and was about to pop it back on when he heard a noise on the other side of the wall he was leaning against. Crouching frozen, he set his helmet down and picked up his rifle up and slowly stood up. Just as his wet hair poked over the wall, a hail of gunfire erupted. Rubber rounds zipped past his head leaving trails in the rain momentarily. Instantly reacting, he lifted up his rifle and opened fire on the muzzle flashes he spotted through the rain and fog. In his right ear voices called out to him from his teammates but he didn't respond; his mind was focused on eliminating the threats. Ignoring his helmet on the ground, he ran into the nearest building and went upstairs. Looking down on them, he saw the leg of an attacker disappear behind on the buildings directly across from where he had stopped.

> "<em>Will! Will! Are you alright?" <em>He suddenly took notice to the frantic calls from Linda in his ear piece.

> "Yeah, I'm fine, I think three or four of them are heading east from my position. Chris, be on the look out, Tangos are heading towards you.<br> "\_Roger that, we should be okay if we can hold our position, but maybe you shou-." \_

> "We're on it," Will was about to end the conversation when he heard someone moving behind him. Spinning on his knee he raised his rifle and aimed at the step behind him.<br> "Echoâ€|" Waiting for a response, his heart began beating faster.

> "Echo echo, friendlies coming up." He loosened his grip on his rifle but just a little. Four drenched Spartans came up, -490 holding his once again dirty helmet.<br> "Thanks JJ," he replied as he tucked it under his arm.

> "No problem, I was going to go and peddle it for some cash but they," he motioned to the others, "convinced me you might need it." It was one of the rare times when a Spartan smiled, let alone his fellow comrades seeing it. The five of them walked down the stairs and Will bent down to wash his helmet once again, this time with his fireteam watching his back. Popping the seal on the helmet he took the lead again, heading towards the east. Incredibly, the rain began to fall even harder as they tried to avoid splashing through the deep puddles that were quickly forming in the streets.<br> "\_I'm hearing some noises out there, could be the rain or it could be them."

\_Chris's voiced was calm as usual and Will knew he wasn't sending the message in terms of getting help but so when they go there they were aware of what was going on. Picking up their pace a little bit, Fireteam Alpha arrived at another large street and checked it quickly. Nothing moved and Will sprinted across just as another burst of gunfire erupted. He shouldered his rifle but instantly realized it wasn't pointed at them. More shots rang out and Will hurriedly brought up a topo-map of the city and found Chris's position. Located in one of the taller buildings that had been constructed, they were in a relatively good position in terms of defense but it would be a nightmare to try and get to due to the large expanse of open space that surrounded it.

> "Alright, we need to split up, JJ, Karl, you two move in from the south while Kayla, Matt, and I come in from the north. Linda, try and come in as fast as possible."<br> "Acknowledgement lights winked on and the group split into two. They ran forward three more blocks before heading north for two. The gunfire was a lot louder than Will had expected and he feared they had underestimated the amount of people they were going up against. Catching a glimpse of the concrete building, Will sent a "wink" to Chris who responded almost instantly. To Will's left, towards a semi-blown out building, it seemed a portion of the gunfire was originating from there. He crouched down a

little as he came up to the door and peeked inside with his fiber optic cable. A few shell casings fell to the ground in the fish eye view he had and he backed off. Motioning to his other teammates that there were enemies inside, they readied their rifles and slowly made their way inside. More casings rolled to the ground and Will looked up to see a portion of the ceiling above them blown out. Muzzle flashes lit up the rooms above and he slowed down even more as they moved up the stairs. Their first mistake was obvious; they hadn't bothered to have anyone watch their rear. The second was slightly more difficult to spot due to the layout of the building which forced them into one room. Priming one of the fake grenades they had been given, Will rolled it towards them and rolled back around the corner and waited three seconds. A loud bang echoed through the building and Fireteam Alpha rushed into the room. Two of the three Spartans, thanks to a special program installed in their suits, were "killed" due to the grenades "damage" values that the rubber rounds had been programmed with. The third was stunned from the grenade and was quickly taken down before he could even get another shot off. Walking out of the building, red lights illuminated around their armor instead of the cool blue LEDs that normally were on, they moved at a rather leisurely pace away from the building. Listening carefully, the volume of gunfire hadn't really decreased all that much which worried Will.

> "JJ, we just cleared the house to the north east of Fireteam Bravo."  
"Affirmative, we've just disengaged from a group of four and are pulling back a little bit. We could use a little bit of help." That last bit caught Will's attention, it was hesitant, like JJ was ashamed to admit they needed the assistance.

> "Don't worry, we'll be there, hang tight. Chris, we're just to the north of you, two story building, roof is blown out."  
"I see the building, but not you guys."

> "I know, JJ, should be to the west of your building, he's with Karl but they're taking heavy fire. We're heading over there right now but I don't know if we'll be able to get there in time."  
"Got it.\_ Where's Linda?"

> "Good question" As if on cue, two shots rang out through the city.  
"Two confirmed kills." Linda's cool voice cut into Will's ear and he took comfort at the guardian angel that was always looking through a scope. A few loud blasts of a horn echoed up and down the streets alerting the Spartans to the fact that the training was finished. Will walked out of the building and headed towards Chris. They both popped their helmets off and grasped their hands together.

> "Hell of a job out there, I owe you."  
"Don't worry about it," Will responded humbly, rain streaming down his face, deviating from it's path every so often. The other Spartans in Echo squadron grouped together, Linda arriving last. Looking up the road, Bravo squad walked slowly.

> "That's the third time this week, maybe they just don't have very good squad unity," JJ remarked after a few seconds of silence.  
"That's not the problem, we've got an unfair advantage." They all looked over at Will who, despite enjoying the company of other Spartans, had mostly stayed to himself. "We've got two veterans of the Covenant War and then two more who have gotten some real combat experience. I'm pretty sure the closest you've gotten to true live fire was just practice against each other with blank rounds."

Water droplets slid down the window as rain splattered against it. Will sat down in a relatively comfortable chair and waited as the shape in the bed stirred.

> "Heyâ€|" Kat's voice was weak and sounded strained. Two small tubes traveled away from her nose and looped back behind her bed into what a small box that controlled all of the different things that they doctors were doing. Even after a week and a half of recovery, she still seemed weak and her face had yet to gain back it's full color. "I assume they've told you what happened?"<br> "Noâ€|not really," he said, smiling a little. The right corner of her mouth curved upward a little and she started to speak.

> "It was apparently a side effect of long term cryogenics. The heart just doesn't want to restart, simple as that. In my case though, my heart started, but it gave out almost immediately afterwards. Slightly more dangerous, but I'm still alive, that's gotta count for something."<br> "Yeah. They split us up into squads, right now you haven't been assigned to one, but once you're back in fighting condition, you'll be put into ours."

> "Who else is in it?" She seemed to perk up slightly at the mention of the other Spartans.<br> "Uh, well, Linda Chris and I, JJ, Karl, Kayla, and Matt," near the end, his eyes traveled to the ceiling and his face contorted as he tried to remember the last names.

> "I know Kayla pretty well, she was in my barracks, the othersâ€|not so well."<br> "Oh, well, they told me to send you their regards." Will looked over at a small digital clock on the wall to his right. Seeing what time it was, he stood up and walked over to the side of Kat's bed. He bent his head over towards hers and then stopped. Pulling back up, he took her hand and rubbed it for a few seconds. "Get well." Walking out of the room, he winced slightly at what he had or hadn't done.

## 12. Off To War

### Chapter 12: Off to War

"How long since we lost contact?"

> "Over half an hour sir, none of our signals are even finding something to bounce back off of." Lieutenant General Avery Johnson II hurried down dimly lit hallways towards a pair of dark wood doors. Standing in front were two fully armed guards, almost their entire body covered in composite armor painted a black color over urban fatigues. Flying past, Johnson could see his reflection of the blue visor that covered their face, hastily returning their salute. Once inside, the Lt. General started speaking again as he met with the other officers who had arranged around a massive holotank imbedded in the ground.<br> "Bring all fleets up to full ready status. Any reserve units need to be brought into active duty and start getting warnings out the governments of the Outer Rim planets."

> "Yes sir," the man who had been hurrying with him turned around and left the room.<br> "Thank-you for joining us so quickly General," one of the officers, much older than Johnson, said. Light danced across all of their faces, aging them by twenty years at least as different images of a planet flicked back and forth. Red warning messages circulated the forested planet.

> "There hasn't been any communication with the planet's defense fleet for more than twenty minutes. I believe it's safe to assume they've been wiped out." A few of the officers broke away from the circle and walked towards the large floor to ceiling windows that afforded a view of the Pacific on one side and metro Sydney on the other.<br> "I'm sorry if this question has already been asked, but how long do we believe the assault lasted?" Johnson asked.

> "No more than ten minutes. Don't take it at face value; their fleet

consisted mostly of a few old <em>Mako</em>-class corvettes using outdated weaponry. Pirates wouldn't have even had a hard time with it."

> "Have any decisions been made regarding troop movements around the area because I have a proposal of my own I'd like to bring forward."<br> "Nothing has been done, we've been waiting for you."

> "Thank-you." Those who had migrated towards the windows moved back to the center as the UNSC HighComm logo floated in the air. Sliding a small disk into a receptor in a chair, Johnson dimmed the lights, furthering the glow that was produced by the holotank. "The last two engagements, if we can even call them that, with the Forerunners were decided even before the first shot was fired. So far," the image flipped to a view of Esterea, "the <em>Keyes </em>was engaged by at least three enemy capital ships and was destroyed in a matter of minutes as well as the planet being burned. Now, if what General Hockers is saying, the battle over Lambda Prime consisted of a poor colony's fleet of UNSC decommissioned corvettes. Neither one of these show our true strength nor the enemy's true strength. Essentially, we're still at square one in terms of creating a viable tactic to use against them. Therefore, I am proposing we reinforce the Outer Rim with as many fleets as possible up to an arbitrary two-thirds point. From there on out, those planets will need to defend themselves with whatever they can afford or evacuate immediately."

> "You want us to just abandon those worlds!" One of the officers spun around and looked wildly into Johnson's eyes.<br> "If we don't do this, every planet from here to there will be in danger! We can not have our fleets running back and forth to try and defend the next hinterland colony that is requesting support for a battle we-can't-win! If you wish to take yours hip and help, then go ahead, but the UNSC fleets won't be there to back you up." A tense mood fell upon the officers and was only broken by a man who had yet to speak.

> "Go ahead with it. General Johnson is correct. Our best hope out winning is by staying back and defending those planets we cannot afford to lose."<br> "But Admiral-."

> "Please, General Nguyen, my mind is made up. Furthermore, I'd like to assign the Spartan squadrons to our largest fleets to give us even more options. General Johnson, I would like you to oversee their operations."<br> "Yes, sir."

> "This meeting is now over, dismissed."<p>

"Where are you going?" Kat sat up in her bed and looked at Will who was fully loaded up.

> "Good question. We're leaving in about an hour so I decided to say goodbye." She leaned over a little and flicked a light on next to her bed. White light illuminated the room and Will suddenly looked even taller as his massive hulk sent shadows against every surface.<br> "Can you tell me what's going? The nurses aren't telling me anything." Will took a deep breath as if to start speaking and then caught it, looking off to his right. "Tell me!" He looked back over and glared for a few seconds.

> "He's back and he's already destroyed two planets. The entire UNSC is fleet being mobilized. Right now they're splitting the Spartans up in squads and assigning us to individual ships. Once you're ready to go, you'll join us, assuming nothing happens between now and then." Kat's gaze had drifted down to her feet and it didn't leave. "What's wrong?"<br> "It's nothing." There was no point in pushing the issue because he knew he would get nowhere.

> "If you say so. I need to get going, stay safe and get well."<br>  
"Nothing else to do now is there?" He laughed and shook his head  
before walking out of the room.

Arriving at landing complex Bravo-Two-Niner, Will set his extra bag down and looked around at the other Spartans. A few Hawks had already landed on some of the pads and had their engines running at the smallest amount of power. Off in the distance he could see bright landing lots turning on as even more Hawks were making their final approach. The rest of his squad showed up and in the darkness he could see even more squads grouping together. After about a half an hour of waiting, a small entourage of officers arrived. All of the Spartans saluted and then were at ease.

> "I'm Lieutenant General Johnson. I'll be commanding the Spartan Company as a whole. Right now, specifics on your missions are pretty much unknown. You'll be divided up into the different battle groups and then further broken down to assigned ships. You'll be under our command and our command only so if you're going on a mission, it's important and not some captain sending you on a mission he deems important." A final Hawk landed and took up the last of the landing pads. "No need to keep your rides waiting. Good luck and give 'em hell." The Spartans saluted as the Lt. General Johnson left the complex and the soldiers were assigned to their designated Hawk for departure.<p>

If this chapter seemsâ€|yuckyâ€|I know it is, I had some serious writer's block with this chapter and this is like the fifth version of it.

### 13. Tigres and Heretics

#### Chapter 13: Tigres and Heretics

Millions of stars suddenly replaced the total blackness of the space outside of the hangar. Will put the last of the gear they were taking into a Hawk and walked over to the airlock doors. Off to his right was a large blue and green planet that looked remarkably like Earth. A few small freighters moved back in forth between larger ships that would move about the different planet systems. On the dark side of the planet, a few large groups of lights were clearly seen through the cloud layer.

> "It's pretty settled for an Outer Rim world, don't you think?" Will asked one of the pilots who had walked behind him.<br> "It was never attacked by the Covenant so it's been chugging along since it was started, but you better get aboard, we'll be leaving in a few minutes." Will nodded and walked back towards the Hawk, sitting down in one of the seats in the rear. The other Spartans were already on board along with all of the gear that they were taking to their final destination.

> "<em>You'll be going to the <em>UNSC Tigre\_, a heavy cruiser, brand new as a matter of fact. Though not the official flagship of the battle group, that honor belongs to the \_UNSC Zealous\_, an assault carrier, it's got the most guns of any ship in nearby.\_" The two side doors on the Hawk closed shut and the rear ramp rose up and locked into place against the passenger compartment's ceiling. A loud roar reverberated through the metal of the ship but quickly fell off as the hangar depressurized and they took a sharp right after leaving the frigate they had ridden on from space. Will looked through one of the view ports and was confused at what he saw. It suddenly dawned on

him that the small dots he was staring at were actually ships.

> "My godâ€¦|look at them allâ€¦|" a few of the other Spartans near him looked out the window and saw what he was seeing. Hundreds of ships were arranged in a loose band around the planet. Smaller pickets of Longswords moved between them, looking like small clouds of glitter. Interspersed throughout the band were much larger ships, some of the largest he had ever seen.<br> "They must be assault carriers," someone commented behind him. Almost as if on cue, one of the behemoths powered up it's engines, all four of them, and started to maneuver around it's nearby allies. Suddenly though, all of the ships started to pan away and the colony came into view. Most of the other Spartans sat back down, as did Will. One last look afforded him a view of their frigate sliding into position among the battle group. After about another minute of riding in the Hawk, a large grey hulk began to slide past the view ports. Before anyone even had a chance to react and get up to look, the drop ship swooped into the hangar bay and landed. The roar of the engines quickly and then abruptly shut off. All three doors opened up and navy personnel started unpacking the gear that had come along. Getting out, Will was amazed at the architectural changes that had happened during his absence. Instead of the dimly lit hangars that seemed stunted, the \_Tigre\_'s was at least ten decks high and was brightly lit. Most of the docking pads were empty but a few, most notably near the ceiling, were occupied by Longswords and Daggers. Made of a dimmer version of the white metal that had become standard, the hangar looked almost like it could double as a hospital if it needed to. Looking back, instead of seeing large blast doors, there was nothing to separate them from the blackness of space, or so he thought. Upon closer inspection he noticed the tell tale distortion of an energy field and concluded that two of them worked in tandem to create an airlock. As he looked back, the other Spartans were carrying their gear towards another Hawk that had been waiting in the hangar.

> "Are you going to grab your gear or should I carry it for you?" Chris asked jokingly.<br> "If you insistâ€¦|" he said as he grabbed his different sacks. They moved away from the landing zone as the Hawk powered it's engines back up and lifted off. After a few moments of waiting around, someone emerged from a door near them and made his way to the Spartans. As he came closer, Will could see that the man was not the usual young plucky soldier who always greeted them but an older man who might've seen the very end of the war with the Covenant. Thick lines cut across his face in patterns and his eyes were in almost a permanent squint and his short cut brown hair was losing a battle against the grey hair around the sides of his head. Even more remarkably, the man was one of the tallest non-Spartans that Will had ever seen.

> "I'm Master Chief Petty Officer Carmich. The Captain has already arranged for your quartering to be near the hangar. All of the weapons you'll need are stored in special lockers in your quarters as well as ammo. You have one Hawk and two Daggers designated for your team that will also be given priority for evacuation in case of emergency." It was a welcome relief to have someone who was straight to the point and wasn't interested in trying to become friends with the Spartans.<br> "Thank-you," Will responded, at least trying to be courteous to the master chief (not John, in case anyone gets confused with the similar ranks). The master chief turned around and headed back towards the door he came from as the Spartans grabbed their bags and followed behind him. In a sudden contrast to the huge hangar they were just in, the normal sized passageways were darker and more claustrophobic. Unlike the halls at the UNSC HighComm buildings, the new metal was only exposed on the walls to provide lighting while the

rest of the architecture was painted a dark, almost black, color. These contrasts produced mixed feelings in Will as he slowly began to yearn for the olive drab colors of the ships now sitting in scrap yards or hacked into pieces for soda cans or cars. They followed the master chief through a dizzying assortment of hallways before arriving at what appeared to be a pair of officer's quarters.

> "These are ours?" Chris asked as they walked into the plush room. Mahogany wood had been placed on the walls and a soft carpeting had been laid on the ground. Instead of a single bed installed, four twins had been arranged in the quarters, cutting down the amount of space they had available to them. In the female's room, though, two larger beds were positioned at the rear of the quarters and most of the amenities, namely a large granite table in the center, were still present.<br> "Neither one is occupied and we've got more of these than there are officers so they wouldn't have been used anyways. Also, a little request from General Johnson goes a long way." Will was unsure if his comment was a joke or disdain for the General. "Put your stuff away but be quick, the captain would like a few words with you ASAP." The Spartans set their gear down near the lockers at the front of the room and exited. Moving through the labyrinth of halls again, they finally arrived at a large elevator and bent down as they forced their bulk into it. While they waited for the doors to close, a few people slammed into the cyborgs and looked up, startled at the hulks of metal standing patiently in the tight space. Eventually, it shut the doors and groaned as it brought the soldiers to the command level. First out was the master chief who hurried through the hallways, following the blue stars painted on the deck. The Spartans were shocked as they entered the radically different bridge layout. Instead of walking through a tight, cramped area to get to the main view port, the walls had been brought down and a large hologram of the ship and its surroundings dominated the center of the room. Like before, stations were arranged all along the room but they were no longer in recessed cubbies but were now stand alone consoles that allowed for better communication between the command crew. Even more surprising was the addition of a second level. The vaulted bridge now housed a new level that jutted out just over the entrance to the bridge. Will looked up at it and saw the room was bathed in a blue light from a floating UNSC insignia over a large table and rows of table. As he walked forward, a shimmer went across the front of it, confirming the presence of glass that could electrolyze to prevent others from looking in on a meeting going on. (Like the doors in Chaos Theory mission in the security company's HQ). The group of soldiers moved to the captain who was reading a message on his personal data pad. They stood rigid behind him as his eyes traveled over the last few sentences. Setting it down on a flat surface to his right, he turned around and saluted them, receiving eight in return.

> "Thank-you master chief, that will be all."<br> "Aye sir." He saluted and about-faced, leaving the bridge.

> "Welcome aboard the <em>Tigre, <em>I've been briefed on what the General was allowed to say, so I'm up to speed on what's going on in regards to your situation."

> "We'll most likely be waiting for our call so we won't be impeding on your crew," Will said.<br> "Don't worry about it, for now at least. Most of them are on the surface right now, very beautiful planet, I'll talk to Johnson and see if he can give you a few days of leave." Will didn't expect anything to come of it, but thanked him anyways. "Oh, before I forget, a software update was sent out to us for your suits. It was sent to the medical bay for some reason, so you should head down there. Dismissed." The Spartans saluted and then

left the bridge. An awkward sight in the hallway, seven heavily armored soldiers wandering aimlessly through a leviathan of a ship, they eventually reached the medical bay to a slightly confused technician.

> "Lemme check on thatâ€|" she said as her hands glided over a holographic keyboard, "Huh, apparently we did receive it. You can just wait here while I grab some fiber optic cables." She stood up and walked over to a small desk in the room they were in. Pulling out the long, almost invisible cord, she hooked it into the computer and took Will's helmet. A small bar went across the screen as the program was downloaded onto the Mk VII, the screen flicked to a new bar as the program was then installed. Each one of the Spartans then moved forward and did the same until they had all upgraded.<p>

A large mercury like orb rose into the air, small droplets of the unknown substance falling back into the large puddle it hovered over. A few smaller orbs rose up and began to circle to largest one.

> "This is Thandon, a Human military planet. Located in the Mazertan Prime system which itself is quite removed from nearby systems. This will be our new target." Forerunners moved in and out of the dim light as they watched John pace around the pool of liquid. His heavy boots echoed in the large hall and the elder creatures stepped aside as he came by. "As most of you know, the Humans have placed almost their entire fleet in the Outer Rim to counter our incursions. Therefore, you will be engaged by the UNSC Navy proper and no more individual cruisers or raggedy ass fleets."<br> "The Covenant couldn't even withstand our might, why should these inferior Humans be any different?" One of the Forerunners said, uncrossing his gauntleted arms. Blue and white lights on his armor moved in the darkness as he followed the Master Chief in his pacing.

> "We have ingenuity. We think out of the box. The Covenant were fools, blinded by glory and religion. They will find our weakness, whatever it may be, and exploit it until we do something about it. But back to my pointâ€|the entire navy is, essentially, stretched to it's limits," the orbs changed to show the fleet in it's current positions, different portions taking on hues of colors to represent specific things. "By attacking at Thandon," he said, pointing at the orb that represented the planet, "they will rush to defend it, weakening the rest of the defenses. Not by much, of course, but they will be weakened. Then, we attack somewhere elseâ€|Testarossa. Again, they will pull their resources to defend that planet." Looking at the groups of fine droplets that formed around the two planets, one couldn't help but notice the weakened lanes it created. "From there, it is a straight shot to Earth. There is no need for an extermination planet by planet, system by system. If Earth falls, the Inner Colonies will die. If they die, the Outer Rim will starve to death."<br> "Our fleets will be stretched thin as well, launching to large scale assaults with a third even larger than both combined. You are leaving a very small margin for error here. Neither of us has the element of surprise, we both know where our home worlds lie and we do not have the luxury of hundreds of colonies as well." The Forerunner commanders looked over at the one who had spoken. He was a younger officer, distinguished in his prior military service.

> "You are already doubting?" John said, almost laughing. "If you wish to eliminate planets one at a time, then be my guest, take your shipsâ€|I'm sorry, <em>ship <em>and do it on your own. But! In the meantime, the rest of our fleets will be preparing to end thisâ€|it's not even a warâ€|this skirmish in a matter of days." The Forerunner contorted his face in a look of disgust but said nothing. A few of the officers near him ever so subtly moved away from him, making it



known that they didn't share in his beliefs. "That's what I thoughâ€|" John turned around and left the room, the echoes from his footsteps the only sound.

"How did everything go?" Kelly asked him. She got up out of her chair and moved over to him. Off in the distance the sounds of a fighter squadron meandered it's way through the city, finally reaching their ears.

> "There is one, he's dangerous. No one follows him but I do not believe I can have him doubting my every move for much longer without some of them seeing it as either a sign of weakness on my part or a sign of strength on his." She put her hands on him and let him sit down on the bed. Leaning forward and looking into his eyes she spoke.<br> "He's getting to you isn't he?"

> "How can he not? My authority is being challenged by himâ€|"<br> "Once everything begins to fall into place no one will take him serious. You know that as well as anyone."

A/N: The spelling of Tiger as: Tigre, is intentional, it's the name of a British ship that fought in the Battle of Trafalgar, as many know, that was the name of the UNSC's flagship that was destroyed at Reach. Zealous is also the name of a ship that participated in the battle.

## 14. A Trip Cut Short

### Chapter 14: A Trip Cut Short

"Hey, Will, two things." Will looked over at Chris who was leaning through the bulkhead to their chambers. From his tone of voice, it sounded important.

> "What?"<br> "Alright, first off. Kat got cleared; she just got put onto a destroyer that's headed here this afternoon."

> "That'sâ€|great." he said, stepping back from a computer console, leaving the TacSat photos of the planet still up on the screen.

"What's the other thing?"<br> "The cap came through; we're got three days on the surface starting tomorrow." Will was shocked at this. Thinking it was the captain just trying to seem nice to the new crew on board, it surprised him that he actually made the request and was then able to get it approved.

> "When is the destroyer supposed to be here?"<br> "I think they said about 1500 hours or somewhere around there."

> "Thanks." Chris just pursed his lips and pulled back out of the hatchway.<p>

Will was uncomfortable in the civilian clothes he had been handed, not because they didn't fit (which they did) but because he rarely ever wore them. Putting his arms through a black jacket, he twisted his neck to try and get the tight cream sweater to sit in a more comfortable position. His olive cargo pants were the only thing he approved of and couldn't help but take a quick glance in the mirror in their room but looked away quickly. He headed towards the door and stopped at his locker, looking at the black M6E sitting on the top. It was rare that he was ever more than a few minutes away from weapons, if not carrying one with him. Grabbing the black pistol, a shoulder holster and an extra clip, he tossed them into his small backpack along with his earpiece headset.

> "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were doing your hair in there," JJ remarked as Will left their quarters.<br>

"Shut it," Will said, shooting a dangerous look his way.  
> "I didn't say anythingâ€¦" <br> "That's what I though."  
> "Our ride is waiting, but we're not the only ones that are going down so we have to hurry." Will nodded and they headed to the Hawk that was waiting for them. A few other marines and navy personnel were waiting outside and only glanced over at the much less imposing Spartans. The other Spartans finally arrived and waited a few more minutes before they left the hangar bay. Turning towards the green planet, the pilot spoke of their plans.<br> "\_We're head to Fort Lawson which is near the capital city, Gallant, you'll get some more info once we land but I figured I would give you an idea of where we're heading." \_Will pretty much ignored what he was saying and looked at the others inside the craft. Making up the majority of the passengers, the Spartans for one of the rare times they weren't in military garb, blended in with their comrades in arms. His eyes finally rested on Kat who looked stunning. Her hair shown in the light of the craft and her perfect body was accentuated by the clothes she wore. Looking up, she saw him staring and smiled, her bright white teeth glistening. Millions of feelings forced their way through Will's body and for the first time, he blushed. A few seconds later the ship started to rattle as it entered the atmosphere.

"\_Welcome to beautiful Thandon! For more information on our halcyon planet, please refer to one of the info stations located outside of the port as well as throughout the city\_"  
> "That would get annoyingâ€¦" Chris said, referring to the large holographic projection of a woman cheerfully welcoming the new arrivals. Due to an accident at the fort they were supposed land at, they were rerouted to the public landing zones and left to get their own transportation to the fort or lodging in the city. Almost immediately, the Spartans split into two groups, Will, Linda, Chris, and Kat in one and JJ, Kayla, Matt, and Karl in the other. For an Outer Rim world, Gallant, at least, was very well developed. Tall skyscrapers rose into the air, their tops jutting in to the crystal blue sky. Cars moved busily about the city as people moved around the sidewalks, going about their business. It was a strange feeling for them; it was rare for them to ever be at a city that was truly alive and not just waiting for the Covenant to blow it off the face of the planet. They started walking in a random directing and Will discreetly placed his headset into his ear but kept the volume down. "I don't know about you, but I am <em>hungry<em>" Chris remarked as he looked around for a restaurant.  
> "I guess we can go and look for something to eat," Linda said. Moving through the city, they finally found a small cafÃ© and sat down to eat. Will looked over the menu and was again lost in a world he had never experienced.<br> "Hey there! I'll take your order whenever you're ready," a waitress said, holding a small holopad in her hand and a stylus in the other.  
> "I need a good burger, and some fries, big soda too, what elseâ€¦" Will looked over at Chris who was absorbing every word on the menu.<br> "I'll just take some water please," Will said.  
> "Salad?" The waitress nodded at Linda's request and wrote it down along with her dressing choice. Kat quickly ordered a salad as well while Chris added on onion rings to his order. No more than five minutes later, all of their orders had arrived and they were eating them. Will looked out over the park to their right and saw the sun falling down behind a snowcapped mountain off in the distance. He took a few sips of his water and just listened to the banter between his squad mates. Once they had all finished and Chris was able to

move, they headed off through the city again. The light slowly dimmed and the crowds on the street transformed from business persons into evening clubbers and couples looking to have a night out on the town.<br> "We should probably head to the base because I know I don't have any money to get a room here," Linda said. The others looked at each other and confirmed her suspicions. A taxi drove by and she quickly waved it down. "We're UNSC personnel butâ€|well, we've got no money. Is there anyway we can get a ride to Fort Lawson?" The taxi driver leaned over the seat and looked at the four of them.

> "Yeah, we can work something out, only problem is, I can take only two people at a time." Linda looked back at the others but turned when the driver spoke again. "It's not me, it's the law."<br> "You two go, we'll wait here," Will said, referring to him and Kat. She slowly turned towards him but looked back at them.

> "It's about a two hour drive there, so unless you wanna wait all night, you're better off flagging another taxi down or I can radio another one to come and grab you guys."<br> "We'll do that."

> "Alright." Linda and Chris got into the back of the yellow car as the driver radioed another taxi. "He'll be here in about ten minutes or so." Will thanked him and stood at the corner of the street with Kat as they waited.<br> "I wonder how that would've gone if we were in our armorâ€|" he said. Kat laughed at his attempt at a joke and to Will, it was like music to his heart. She scooted closer to him and they leaned against a pillar together.

> "Thanks for visiting me at the hospital. You're the only one that came regularly."<br> "We were pretty busy, everyone else wanted to come but they had to get back up to speed. Linda and I were already up to speed on everything so we had more free time."

> "Still, thanks. You kept me from thinking everyone had left to go onto better things, leaving me behind for good." Will looked down and felt her shoulder bump up against his.<br> "Did you know that I've never been to a city that hasn't been under assault or when we weren't on a mission?" he said, trying to break the silence. "I don't really remember anything from my childhood except Reach and when we were old enough to be on our own, well, we were being Spartans."

> "I've always known war, ever since I was a kid, Retter was always under the threat of attack and then I was pulled into the Spartan program."<br> "It'll be weird if we can make it through this alive. Having a normal life I mean. They probably never even thought of what they would do with us afterwards, but I bet once the Covenant showed up, those people who had the authority assumed either we or Humanity wouldn't survive which would eliminate that problem." Another taxi pulled up and the driver slid down his window.

> "You the soldiers?" he called out.<br> "Yeah, that'd be us." He motioned with his hand and they walked over. Will opened up the door for Kat and placed his hand on the small of her back as she bent down to get in. He followed in behind her and the driver started driving.

> "Fort Lawson right?"<br> "Yes," Will responded. He looked into the rearview mirror and saw the driver's eyes go from him to Kat who was tying her shoe.

> "I've gotta make a personnel call, hope ya don't mind me putting up the separator." Both of the Spartans shook their head and a black screen slid up in between the two rows of seats. Will's heart started to beat a little faster as he rode in the car. Surprisingly fast, the lights of the city disappeared behind them and were replaced by lush green forests, plunging them into darkness.<br> "This reminds me of Reach," Will said, remembering the sprawling forests that they spent their childhood training in. He felt a soft hand touch his and he looked down, seeing Kat's grasping his. Her head then settled onto

his hard shoulder and his heart quickened it's pace once more. His body started to get a little clammy as he felt her body come even closer to his. They stayed like this for a few minutes before he felt her head move off of his shoulder. Looking over, she was staring right at him.

> "We can't keep pretending this isn't here." He didn't respond but took a deep breath. Suddenly he felt Kat's body up against his and he wrapped his arms around her as they pressed their lips together. They pushed closer to each other, and time seemed to slow as they kissed. Will's hand moved along her body as she pressed harder and harder against him. Will felt something in the back of his mind and stopped.<br> "This can't happenâ€|" he said, breathing heavily.

> "What?"<br> "This, all of this, it can't happen. What just happened there...it just \_can't\_." Kat slid away from him.

> "I don't understand."<br> "We're soldiers, we were created to kill, not to love. You and I will always know what's between us but it has to stay within ourselves." It surprised him how easily it came out, but it still hurt. She was the one person he had ever felt this way about and he was telling her off essentially. In the darkness he saw her look away but she said nothing. He was about to try and comfort her when he heard something in his left ear. Quickly bumping up the volume of his earpiece he was thrown into the center of a frantic conversation.

> "<em>Multiple hostiles, requesting assistance from any nearby ships!<em> \_We're taking heavy fire! Just calm down son, help is on the way. They're all over, fire the main-. Jesus, did you see that? Launch fighter squadrons!"\_

> "Shit." Will knocked on the screen quickly and the driver lowered it down.<br> "What can I do for ya?"

> "Fast, go as fast as you can to the fort!" A confused look came across his face. "Just do it!" They suddenly accelerated as they sped through the forest.<br> "What's going on?" Kat's voice was methodical and cool.

> "They're here," he responded while going through his bag. His hand felt cold metal and he gripped the barrel of his pistol. Digging a little more he found the extra clip and holster.<br> "You brought a pistol with you? What were you expecting to happen?"

> "You've got a gun in here?" They both glanced over at the driver who looked back at the road. Sliding the thin clear mouthpiece down from his earpiece, he called tried to get a hold of the rest of his squadron.<br> "\_JJ here, what's going on?"\_

> "Trouble, get to Lawson ASAP!"<br> "\_Roger that." \_ Willed pulled the slide back and chambered a round.

> "You didn't bring an extra did you?" Kat asked.<br> "I didn't think I'd need this one. Otherwise I would've grabbed a few more magazines." Off in the distance Will saw the lights of the fort and suddenly felt relieved. Their taxi sped up to the gate where the two Spartans jumped out. "I don't think we'll have time to be dealing with the money issue. But whatever you do, stay away from the city.

> "Yeah yeah yeah," the driver said, suddenly jittery as he turned his car around and took off. Running up the guards, Will was finally able to see the new standard issue armor for the Marine Corps. It was more or less the ODS armor but covering even more of their body.<br> "We're Spartans!" he yelled as they ran by them. Fort Lawson was bustling with activity as Hawks were loading up with Marines and gear. Soldiers hurried back and forth and in all of the commotion, Will spotted Linda and Chris.

> "They're-," Linda started to say but was cut off by Will.<br> "Yeah, I heard. The others are on their way here but I don't think

we'll have time to get to the ship and get our armor." Their trip was suddenly looking as if it was quickly becoming a liability. The sound of a horn blaring caught their attention and they saw a large SUV come flying up to the gate. Music was blasting from the car, shaking the ground they stood on. Four Spartans jumped out of it and ran through the gates of the base as the SUV peeled out and headed back down the mountain. JJ and his group ran up to their squad mates and were filled in on the situation. The base was quickly emptying out as Hawks ferried Marines to the city to fortify it ahead of time. Just as Will was about to find someone in charge, a colonel came running over to them. Saluting him, the Spartans then listened to what he came to say.

> "General Johnson has told me to tell you that your mission is to defend the city at all costs. Transport to the battle group is out of the question right now and unfortunately, we don't have any spare armor lying around. You are in luck though, we've got one Puma still left and an armory with some weapons and ammo that are still there. Once we can get you back to the Tigre, I'll send a Hawk your direction." They saluted again and the colonel jumped onto the last Hawk on the landing pad. Instead of heading towards the city, it flew up over the mountain and out of site. The Spartans were now the only ones inhabiting the eerily silent fort.

## 15. Metropolis Assault

### Chapter 15: Metropolis Assault

"Let's see what we've got!" Will said almost to himself as he moved through the armory. Most of the weapons had already been grabbed but a crate of BR55 Mk IIs as well as plenty of ammo for them. Grabbing them one at a time, he handed them to the Spartans who continued to look throughout the room for whatever they could find. Moving on, Will came across a stack of four load bearing vest which he passed out after keeping one for himself.

> "Score." Turning around, Chris picked up a SAW variant BR55 and a few magazine drums. Will tossed him a now empty backpack and Chris stuffed the drums into it. Replacing his shoulder holster with a leg strap, he put his M6E into it. The last thing that he came across was a pair of goggles that he quickly pulled over his head, keeping them off of his eyes though. Looking back, the normally identical looking Spartans, all wearing their armor and having almost identical loadouts, were now a hodgepodge of civilian clothing and whatever gear they could find. Luckily most of them found what they were looking for, especially Linda who was already at work tweaking the different settings of the SRSB70 she had found.  
"Alright, we've got room for five people on the LRV. We can probably fit one more onto it but I'd feel a lot more comfortable if we had somebody keeping tabs on what's going on up there and around the city." He scanned the group and decided he would give Kayla that job considering she was unfortunate enough to be wearing a dress. Pointing at her, she showed disgust on her face at the position she was being assigned but brought her rifle over her head and nodded. "Matt, you stay here too, help Kayla and if they attack here, defend it. Got it?"

> "Yes sir," they both responded before heading out of the armory.  
"How many of you have radios with you?" he asked the remaining six. JJ was the only one who acknowledged that fact. "You take Kat and Karl with you alright? You're the new fireteam bravo. Chris, you're with me, Linda, you do your thing." Will zipped up his

load bearing vest and taped a few grenades to it that JJ had passed out. Making one last sweep, Will noticed something that was surprising. Kneeling down next to a metal case, he popped the lid and found the reason for the warning symbols. Nestled in foam padding as well as cooling pack, a Fury tactical nuke, more or less a nuclear football, was lying in pristine condition, unarmed. "JJ, are there any extra backpacks lying around here?"

> "Uhâ€|yeah, here's one," he said, tossing a camo pack over to him. Picking up the nuke he placed it into the bag as well as the last of the ammo for his weapons. Even without his Mark VII, or Mark VI for that matter, the Fury was still relatively light and could be easily tossed, not far enough to throw it casually at enemies, but enough. They headed out of the armory and over to a hangar on the other side of the fort. Sitting in the back was a pristine Puma. Will designated seating arrangements and started the LRV. Doing a quick comm check with JJ and Kayla, they made sure they had everything and headed out.<p>

Flying through the forest, straddling the yellow lines on the road, Will sped towards the city with a purpose. Darkness still enveloped them but the bright halogen lamps on the Puma easily lit up his entire field of vision as if the sun was out.

> "<em>I'm picking up multiple unregistered craft, they fit the silhouette of Longswords but they're moving pretty fastâ€|"<em> Kayla chatted in JJ and Will's ear.

> "ETA for their arrival at the city?" he asked.<br> "\_About a minute or so, they should be right over you now." \_Sure enough, a loud scream filled the air as fighters roared overhead. Sticking his head out of the window, he caught the glimpse of two engines glowing a bright yellow, almost white color.

> "I've got a visual on them, they look like ours." Will couldn't even hear what Kayla was saying as another squadron roared overhead. But once they had passed, Kayla was yelling out to him.<br>

"\_Hostiles\_! Hostiles! \_I'm tracking at leastâ€|shit, at least thirty enemy fighters moving in behind this next wave\_" One more squadron came overhead but these were flying differently. Obviously not going as fast, they were moving in and out of each other as they turned to face their attackers. The roar of theirs chainguns was almost as loud as their engines and the golden tracers began lighting up the night sky. Coming around a corner, Will was afforded an unobstructed view of the city, nestled up against a mountain chain at the bottom of a large valley floor. Up ahead, the fighters that had passed overhead were now heading back, their guns blazing along with missiles streaking through the clear air. Dark purple bolts of energy sizzled through the air from the still invisible attackers. One of the Longswords took one of the shots on it's wing and it immediately caught on fire. Orange flames trailed behind the wounded fighter as it quickly began descending to the ground. Two bright flashes lit up the cockpit as the pilots ejected before their fighter exploded in midair, the wreckage thrown away from the ball of fire in long arcing trails of flames and thick smoke. Going almost straight down from the large explosion was a burning hunk of metal that represented what was left of the deserted fuselage. Dark shapes continued to fly around each other, only distinguishable as they blocked out the stars and whenever their missiles and guns lit their hulls up in a strobe light like fashion. Will continued to drive, trying to ignore the showers of 110mm rounds that every so often would fall near them (luckily none hit them). Only a few miles out from the city, he glanced up at the clear sky and could faintly make out small flashes of light that were their only sign of the battle raging overhead. From his view, it

seemed like the city had yet to be touched which meant that the flyboys up top had kept the perimeter secure. Driving into the same entrance that he had just went through hours earlier he could see the city was full of activity. It was obvious that the capital had become priority and that all of the nearby bases were sending their troops to it. Slowing down, squads of marines were moving through the streets as others were arriving on large transport trucks. Will gripped his pistol as lightning broke the sky over one of the mountains.

> "Hmm, looks like it's going to be a <em>fuuun<em> night tonight," Chris commented from one of the side seats. Will stopped at one of the cross streets as the vehicles moved ahead of them. The sounds of the air battle continued to rage on as the Longswords put up a good fight against an enemy that obviously had the upper hand in the situation. AA batteries suddenly lit up as red objects hurtled through the atmosphere, long trails of smoke floating lazily in the dark sky. Chunks of metal ripped off of the objects, creating smaller pieces that angled away from the original piece. Gold, red, and green tracers ripped through the sky at the debris before the gunners realized what the pieces were and held their fire. Driving through the streets became increasingly difficult as soldiers became more common and barriers more often. It finally got to the point that it was no longer safe to keep driving and they stopped near what appeared to be a command center. Large metal barriers had been set up all around the intersection multiple rows thick and two Vipers had been positioned so that they protected the two open roads that led deeper into the city. Rising high above them were the glistening skyscrapers, some were more traditional designs that were obviously built before the war with the Covenant while others were more organic looking with pearlescent windows and twisting designs. Most of the soldiers that they passed by had their helmets on and were looking up at the night sky that was beginning to cloud over as the battle raged evermore. A few others stood around what appeared to be serving as a forward command station and were looking over reports. Will walked over to one of the soldiers without his helmet on. A blue datapad illuminated his face in the darkness and he looked over at them as they headed his way.

> "I had heard reports about some Spartans who weren't Spartans. I'm assuming that's you?"<br> "You'd be correct on that," Will said as he extended a hand.

> "I'm Sergeant Tahoda, my squad is here with Sergeant Kaufman's. I'm sure you hear this a lot, but we're glad to have you here, I'm not sure how all of this is going to go down, but you can never have too many men."<br> "It looks like you've got the area pretty well secured. We've got one sniper with us as well as a SAW." Tahoda rubbed his neck and looked around the intersection.

> "Reallyâ€¦I think you should do whatever you want to. We've got it pretty well covered here, about fifty guys along with two tanks. Frankly, I think you should work by yourselves, we'll be too much of a hindrance due to our orders." Will glanced around the city and was slowly noticing a feeling of desperation and wasn't sure why.<br> "Alright, we'll be in touch," he responded, tapping his earpiece. Echo squad moved away from the group of Marines and went to a less crowded area. Taking a knee, Will rubbed the bridge of his nose and squinted his eyes shut, wrinkling his face up. His fellow Spartans surrounded him and waited for what he had to say. "Linda, you know what to do, find a good spot and keep this area covered as best you can. JJ, I want you to move parallel with Chris and I, you're there to help us back out and we'll do the same for you. Once we can find a staging area or a large LZ of theirs, I'm going to blow the Fury,

hopefully that'll buy us enough time until we can get some more reinforcements."

> "Got it," JJ responded, turning his head up towards the sky. More objects were falling and at first glance looked as if they were just more pieces of debris, but after watching their angle flatten out and the flames dissipate away, it was clear that it wasn't just debris. Tracers again jumped into the air, some of the rounds exploding below the cloud layer while others detonated inside the clouds, lighting them up with a golden hue. A few of the rounds hit their mark and blue shields flared up in large ovals.<br> "Let's move." The Spartans moved from their spot near an alleyway and headed in towards the city. It became painfully obvious that the command had decided they would rather, instead of reinforcing the entire city, create a ring around the center, hoping the Forerunners would land there and get caught in the crossfire. Even more obvious was the fact that they weren't adhering to the brass's plan and were coming down on the south side of the city hard. Purple lances of energy flew towards the ground and after a few seconds, the sound of their impacts reached their ears dully. Bright flashes of light lit up the darkened city as the Marines began to fight back. Will and his squad moved through the Marine command post and into the deserted city.

> "What the hell are they doing?" someone said behind them as JJ's fireteam headed off to the left, getting onto the street just east of Will and Chris. Reaching a small statue at the bottom of a grand set of marble steps, Will pushed up against the pedestal and radioed JJ.<br> "We're in position, tell us when you're ready."

> "<em>Give me a few more seconds," <em>footsteps punched through his comm channel as he ran. "\_Alright, we're good." \_ Will and Chris moved up to the corner of the street and looked to their left. A head peeked out from around the corner and motioned ahead. The two fireteams got up and moved across to the next intersection. They went one more street before they stopped. A low thrumming began to shake the ground as they pressed up against the glass windows of a lobby. Small cracks appeared near the base of the panels and Will got off before more spiderwebs cut up through the glass. The sound continued to grow louder until it reached it's pinnacle. He felt pain inside all throughout his body as the sound vibrated his organs. Moving down through the streets, a large black ship slowly came to the ground as the sound quickly faded to a much more bearable level. Blue conduits lined the two pronged craft as it rested a few meters above the ground. Bright lights flashed on and swept the dark streets, dust beginning to swirl around it. Two turrets located on either side of a protruding cockpit swiveled back and forth, scanning the streets for any targets. It's two large engines illuminated the street behind it in a bright white light that flickered in intensity. Just below the cockpit, blue energy began to pulse and lick at the ground before it stabilized. Black silhouettes immediately dropped to the ground. For a few seconds, the ship waited as it unloaded it's cargo before rising up into the air. Two strips, in line with the turrets, powered on with the same blue energy that was present on it and the turrets slid from their position on top of the pronged hull to the bottom before it headed towards the command post. Flying over the streets, purple bolts of energy charred the ground around the Marines as a hail of gunfire erupted from them before abruptly stopping. Looking back at the soldiers that had just been dropped off, two blue laser beams flashed on and began to scan around the streets. Small lights on their armor moved around in the darkness as they breathed and shifted. Heavy footsteps echoed between the buildings as the two beams of lasers moved to the sides of the street as well as the lights on the armor. Noticing a pane of broken glass that had broken



from the sound, Will and Chris headed inside, carefully dodging the shards that were all over the ground.

> "JJ, get some cover fast, we've got tangeros on the ground."<br>  
"\_Affirmative\_." The footsteps continued to echo in the streets as the soldiers made their way towards the glass lobby. Will felt his heart race as his palms began to get sweaty. Twisting his hand on the grip of his rifle, he positioned it into his shoulder just right. He was about to get up a little bit when the blue laser danced over the couch they had taken cover behind. As it moved back and forth over their position, he knew they had been spotted, the footsteps suddenly stopping, replaced by the sound of rifles being readied. He started to flash hand signals to Chris in the darkness. Move to the right, open fire, while Will went left and opened up as well. Just as he was about to give the go signal, a shot rang out through the streets. The sound flittered back and forth to their ears, cut off by the sound of a dull thud hitting the ground. Poking his head out, a dark shape lie still on the ground, one of the other enemies crouching over it, his rifle pointed into the air. Heavy footsteps moved into the same lobby that they were occupying and Will whirled around to see the shapes moving up against the glass, the body still lying near the broken pane, his laser pointing out towards another building. Slowly, Will moved his hand to chest and found the corner of a piece of tape holding one of his grenades in place. It seemed like forever before he was able to roll the grenade off of the strip. He slid his finger over the primer and pressed it down, getting his bearings; he pressed the trigger down with his thumb. A small LED winked on near the bottom of the detonating cap and he let go of the primer, throwing the grenade towards the Forerunners. The sound of the trigger popping off rang through the air as he ducked down below the couch. Before the enemies could even move out of the way, the grenade detonated, blowing out the remaining glass and letting out a deafening roar. Shrapnel embedded itself into the couch they were behind and took chunks out of the stone flooring. He stood up as fast as possible and started firing at where they had just been standing. The muzzle flashes from his rifle acted like a strobe light, doubling the effect when Chris opened fire. Flickers of blue energy licked at the ground as the powerful rounds impacted into them. One of the Forerunners fell to the ground under the hail of gunfire from the SAW variant. Across the street, purple rounds of energy flew into the lobby, obviously aimed at the muzzle flashes. Ducking down after the first few shots just missed them, Will and Chris waited as the bolts of energy shattered pieces of stone around them and burnt through the wall in front. Another shot rang out from somewhere and for a few seconds, the fire was abated. Taking advantage of this, the two soldiers scrambled out of the lobby and onto the street. Will led the way and got to a small maintenance doorway, but Chris wasn't so lucky. The Forerunners had obviously seen that their targets had moved and shifted their fire. Jumping behind a thick pillar, Chris leaned up against it and squatted down as rounds slammed into the area around him. He looked around him for a more secure position but it was no use, he was stuck.

> "JJ, get you ass over here! We're taking fire from multiple hostiles and are pinned down!" Amidst the sound of gunfire, footsteps broke through and he realized that they were being flanked from the area that the enemy had originally inserted at. Reinforcing this, shots began to come from a new angle, just missing Chris's legs and impacting on the corner of the wall that Will was up against. Chunks of concrete exploded around him and he felt shooting pain all around his face as the somewhat large pieces cut the right side of it up. "JJ! Where the fuck are you?" No answer. More shots hit

around him and he had to jump out of the way to dodge a stray bolt that almost took his foot off. Catching himself before he exposed his head, he leaned up against the metal door and tried to force it open. Tempted to shoot the lock off, he wasn't sure if the shots were aimed at him or Chris and decided to not give his position away. Scooting up to the very extreme of his cover, he peeked out to see Chris standing in an awkward position to stay in what was left of the pillar he was at. "Hold on!" he yelled out, slapping a new clip into his rifle, tossing the quarter full mag near the door to make sure he didn't grab it thinking it was full. "Slide your gun over so I can use it for cover fire!" Chris nodded and unslung the BR55 variant. Getting down on a knee, he pushed it with full force, sliding it right to Will. He flipped his own rifle onto his back and got the SAW into firing position. "Get low to the next pillar and then sprint in over here!"

> "If you say so!" Will gave himself a three count before popping out around cover. Chris was down as low as possible and took off running once the first round popped off. Staying below his cone of fire, he came back up and scrambled into the little alcove as Will continued firing.<br> "Kayla! Get anyone up on the radio, we need immediate assistance south of Sergeant Tahoda and Sergeant Kaufmann's position."

> "<em>Affirmative Will, the battlenet is pretty blocked up right now. The two squads got strafed hard by a drop ship, one of their tanks was taken out and the other took severe damage. Wait! I've got an idle Longsword squadron a few miles from your position."<em> It was music to his ears as he heard her say that. Waiting for a few seconds, she came back on. "\_Stay behind whatever you can, they're going to be doing strafing runs from North to South, ETA twenty seconds."\_

> "You're a lifesaver, oh-four-three out." Turning to Chris, he explained the news. Just as he finished, the sound of jets roared off in the distance, quickly followed by the sound of machine guns and rockets. The golden rounds flew into the road, kicking up sprays of rock two feet into the air just as the rockets impacted behind them. Concussions rocked their bodies as the explosions pounded the air around them. Lasting for almost ten seconds, the strafing run finally ended with the sound of afterburners kicking in. Almost a full minute went by before he dared moving, realizing that someone was speaking to him.<br> "Will! Can you hear me?" He thought it was Kayla yelling but he recognized the female voice as someone different. Out across the street, three shapes were crouching near a row of blown out glass. Yelling as loud as he could, Will responded.

> "WE'RE FINE, EVERYTHING IS FINE OVER HERE!" One of them raised their arm and he assumed they were giving him a thumbs up.<br> "Maybe you should try keeping your voice down a little bit?" someone called out, just barely reaching Will's ears.

> "WHAT!"<br> "Sir, shut the hell up, sir!" JJ called out. Finally regaining his senses, Will rubbed his ears, blood coming back off on his fingers. Dizziness quickly set in and he leant up against the wall for support. The three shapes moved across the street as fast as possible and came up to Chris and Will, both of whom were suffering from perforated eardrums. Kat came up to Will and looked him over quickly. Blood and dirt covered the entire right side of his face and down onto his vest and shirt. Despite his ordeal, Chris was in relatively good condition; his only major wound was a slightly burned shin from a grazing shot.

> "Let's just wait here for a second," Will said much quieter.<p>

A/N: Normally I don't do this, but could you please R & R? I've got no real idea how my story is in terms of writing without very much feedback. Thanks.

## 16. In A Tight Spot

### Chapter 16: In A Tight Spot

"What took so long?" Will was sitting on the ground, wiping the blood and dirt off of his face as well as trying to wait for the vertigo to go away. A bright light began to flood the city and the gasps the other Spartans made forced Will's body towards the road. Red flames pierced through the clouds as an almost completely intact cruiser plummeted through the atmosphere. The twin blasts of a sonic boom shook through the city, cracking even more glass as well as sending shooting pains through his ears. Long streaks of red flames trailed behind the cruiser as broke through the clouds and fell towards the planet's surface. Large pieces of debris broke off, flying off at steeper trajectories and leaving shorter-lived trails of flames behind them. Moving out of sight, the bright glow continued until a blinding flash erupted somewhere on the other side of the mountains. Tremors flew through the ground as the Spartans kept their footing on the swaying ground. Yet again, more glass cracked and shattered as it warped in all different directions. High in the sky, once the blinding light dissipated, a large plume of dirt miles high was illuminated by the flames along with pieces of the cruiser that were sent back up into the air.

> "Holyâ€|shitâ€|" Karl said, craning his neck into the air. "We need to move now," Will said, regaining control of his squad in fell swoop. A low humming sound filled the air as even more drop ships moved about the city. "Kayla, I need an update, what is the situation topside?" "<em>Definitely could be better. For the most part, they're holding their own, but a few holes have appeared and their ships are just slipping right through. Most of the Super MACs defending your region were taken out and the AA defenses aren't doing too well on their approaches." <em> Will winced at the comment and let his mind start to develop a strategy.

> "Can you give me any info on the city right now as well as an update on a ride to the <em>Tigre<em>?"

> "<em>Negative on both of those, cloud cover has obstructed the view of those satellites still working and it seems that there is a stalemate between evacuating the planet and reinforcing it with more soldiers<em>." The situation was looking worse and worse for the Spartans. Without any kind of intel, they were running blind and poorly equipped. Will took a few deep breathes as he heard the battle around them slowly ramping up. A few drop ships flew overhead, circling around a nearby building before dropping down into the streets. Another pair landed off to their right as an entire wing flew directly overhead.

> "We're being boxed inâ€|" Kat said, stepping away from Chris's leg. Will looked around as even more drop ships moved over head the city. The clouds overhead them finally began to let loose and rain came pouring down. Will looked around as wave after wave of drop ships screamed overhead. "<em>They're getting pretty close to the base, sorry John, we need to get away from here as fast as possible."<em>

> "Do it, don't fight unless you have to." Looking through the haze, he could see the engines of the ships flaring bright blue as they dropped down to the surface. "C'mon, we're going," Will said, his

squad quickly falling in behind him. The decision he had to make was a hard one though. They could either try and find a Human command post and help defend it, or punch in and set off the Fury in the middle of the enemy. Just seconds ago, he was ready to head straight at them and take as many down as possible but something changed in him, he wasâ€|afraid. "Willâ€|we can't just stand here," Kat said quietly to him. He nodded and began to walk south, he owed it to himself to at least try and do something about John's actions.<p>

Moving through the street, Will's squad stayed up against the sides of the buildings as they made their way farther into the city. Every so often, a gunship would come overhead but none of them unloaded any troops. A grey light began to shine from the east as the system's star began to rise over the horizon and Will began to feel slightly anxious at the prospect of moving through an enemy controlled city in broad daylight. The low rumblings of another drop ship began to shake the ground and Will jumped into the entrance to a small diner while his squad mates found other places as well. Moving through the streets, the sleek craft scanned back and forth with it's turrets, employing tactics reminiscent of the Covenant and their Phantoms. After a minute or so passed, the squad moved out onto the sidewalk again, heading to some unknown destination. Every so often, Will would catch a glimpse of towers of thick black smoke billowing into the air as well as a whiff of some foul smelling stench that would go away just as fast as it came. Coming to another intersection, he took a knee and scanned it repeatedly for any sign of movement. Seeing nothing, he bounded across and covered his squad mates. They began to walk again, seeing no signs of the ghosts that had so easily taken the city. Will was about to reach an alleyway when he thought he heard something. Holding his arm up, the rest of his squad got low and readied his rifle. He grabbed his combat knife and held it with his left hand while also supporting his rifle. Assuming it was nothing but side effects from the burst eardrums, but not willing to take any chances, he moved up as quiet as possible to the corner of the building. Pressing his back up against the wall and controlling his breathing, he looked at the chipped corner, approaching ever so slowly. Once his shoulder moved to the very edge of it, he stopped for a few seconds before spinning around, his rifle at the ready. But before he could even see the alleyway, a heavy shoulder slammed into his chest mid-turn, sending him out into the drenched street. Gunfire erupted from the Spartans as a dark shape walked over towards Will. Shrugging off the shock, he fumbled in the rain to find his rifle but it was too far for him to reach. Looking to his left, the black armored creature lowered it's rifle to aim directly at his head, his blue shields flaring as the rounds pounded into them. Time seemed to stop as Will stared into the blank face mask in front of him, the only point of reference being a thin blue strip where he assumed eye level was. Metallic looking hair lay on it's right shoulder, bundled together in ornate bands that dripped and glistened in the pouring rain. In a split second, Will was back on his feet and had his pistol pointed at the Forerunner. His squad mates took off the rest of his shields as he fired round after round at his torso. Sprays of thick purple-black blood erupted from his back as the powerful rounds slammed into and then tore their way through his flesh. A little bit of the fine mists caught Will in the face as his pistol's bolt locked back, his clip empty. Popping the clip out, he slapped in another one and began to fire again. One of his shots hit the Forerunner's skull from the rear and exploded out the front. Another spray of blood erupted before the already critically wounded creature fell into

puddles soaked with it's own blood. Walking forward cautiously, Will looked at the bullet ridden corpse and kicked it over onto it's back. A quarter sized hole had appeared just above the blue visor marking the blatantly obvious exit wound from his pistol round.

> "Nice shot," JJ remarked. Rain continued to pour down as the Spartans began reorganizing on the sidewalk. Bending over to grab his rifle, Will heard something fall out of his backpack and twisted to his left to grab it from a deep puddle. His fingers were about to grasp the black magazine when a searing pain shot through his shoulder and the sound of an alien weapon discharging echoed through the city streets. Looking over, a fine red mist floated down to the ground from a black wound just below his collarbone. Realizing what had happened, he sprinted towards the alleyway as another shot hit the street in front of him. "That looks pretty bad," Kat said, moving in to look at the wound. "It's fine," Will responded quickly, "The bolt cauterized the wound, there isn't any bleeding." Kat looked at the wound one more time quickly and saw that he was correct, a thick black layer had developed over both entrance and exit of the relatively small hole, stopping any potential bleeding. Will moved a little farther into the alleyway as JJ and Karl moved in to take up position at the corner of the building while Chris and Kat moved into the alley to watch their back. "Will—we've got a problem here. We've got a company sized group moving down the street towards us." Will spun around to face JJ as he moved over to the corner. Sure enough, a black group of soldiers were walking down the street towards their position. "We don't know if they even know we're here," he said. JJ cocked his head towards the dead body lying in the middle of the street. There was no getting around it, they would be found eventually. "Alright, try and raise someone on the radio and give them our coordinates."

> "I need to borrow your radio then, my batteries died last night." Will took it off his ear and walked back towards Chris and Kat. "Keep your eyes on this entrance, if anything goes past, hold your fire until we know for sure they saw us, no need to give them a reason to attack if they don't know we're here." He walked away from them without any questions of what was going on, it was obvious they heard JJ's comment. Heading towards the next street, he looked out down it and saw another group of almost the same size. Desperately looking for some kind of an escape route, his search turned up nothing that they could get to without being seen. As the group moved closer, he could see their stances much more clearly. Instead of nonchalantly marching through the streets, they were down low, rifles at the ready, constantly scanning back and forth, ready to take down anything that caught their idea. He swore under his breath and moved back into the relative darkness of the alleyway and just wished that there was at least some cover for them to use but wishes wouldn't grant them Titanium-A barriers or tanks, at least not in this situation. His hand unconsciously moved to his wound and rubbed some of the nearby flesh. It was surprising, he had expected it to hurt but all he felt was a dull throb. The nerves must've been destroyed, he thought to himself, moving the entire shoulder to make sure it wouldn't stiffen up.

> "Something wrong?" Kat asked him as he walked by. His face must've given something away. "Another company is moving down that street as well. We're most likely caught between around five hundred soldiers, give or take a few." Even for fully armed Spartan squad, those odds were hard to overcome, but for a weakened section with the basic supplies, no armor and with no reinforcements even on the cusp, those odds were insurmountable. Their only hope was a miracle. Will remembered the Fury he had thrown into his bag. Pulling it out, he

looked it over before looking at the rest of his squad for some sense of their opinion. "That's got a klick and a half blast radius" Chris said, not too enthusiastically. "But we've got five hundred soldiers marching to us, that's a lot to lose in one blast. One hundred to one kill ratio," JJ shot back. The sound of boots became audible over the rain. "I'm with JJ on this one, we're only going to get one shot," Karl added in. Will looked at Kat who was staring at the street. Her eyes moved to the ground before she spoke. "It won't turn the tide of the battle, it won't get us the city back, you should save it." JJ and Karl were getting antsy and were waiting for a decision. Without even thinking, Will turned on the small LCD display on the nuke and started to move through the security protocols. He was at the very last one when JJ yelled for him to stop. "Wait!" his finger was pressed up against his ear as he listened. Even with his damaged hearing, Will heard a low roar off in the distance. Sliding his wet fingers away from the buttons to keep him from accidentally firing off the Fury. "They got my message! Friendlies inbound! I read you Oscar Five, Echo squad is all here." Will shut down the nuke and put it back in his bag. Even with the help they would be receiving, they were still in a bad position because the Forerunners would most likely reach them first. "Get and ETA for arrival and tell them we're about to be overrun!" Will yelled out, his breath now making puffs of white mist in front of him. Rain poured off of his wet hair as he moved back and forth, wracking his brain to come up with some plan to stall their hunters. Pushing JJ away from the corner of the wall, he was taken back by what was going on. Instead of moving full force ahead, they had sent out small detachments to move forward towards the corpse sitting in the middle of the street. Moving up in the same, low, attentive stance, the Forerunners moved up to the body and looked it over. A few took a knee around it and began to scan their surroundings while a few others moved back. Emerging from the massive group that had stopped, a much taller creature walked forward. Carrying no gun, it moved with a smug grace as if impervious to anything that could be thrown at him. A strange phenomenon came into focus as he came closer. The rain, coming down so hard that there was almost no visibility beyond the block they were all situated at, rolled away from his dry body in an orb, faintly glowing blue. His heavy boots slammed into the puddles around him as he looked around, his eyes visible without a helmet on. Bending down next to the corpse, he ran his fingers along it, pulling something out of the mush that had become it's back. A deformed round quickly appeared as the blood washed away in the rain. Closer now, the screams of human engines echoed around and the left side of his head, devoid of an ear, like the Elites, pointed skywards as if taunting the aircraft to take him on. Will gripped his rifle and tapped JJ on the back who proceeded to tap Karl. The three of them watched as the creature stood back up and looked at all of the blood and shells that were scattered about. Something then caught his interest. A puddle that was almost directly in front of the alleyway was his new target. Running his fingers through it again, Will finally saw what he saw. The crimson tinge in the water had prompted the creature to smell his wet fingers, his head suddenly seeming alert. Again, it stood up, but this time slower, more deliberate. A long blue blade erupted from his wrist as steam began to rise from it. The orb the had surrounded him before disappeared and the rain finally began to soak his body. Slowly and quietly it moved towards the entrance to the alley as other soldiers turned around and brought their rifles up and moved in behind him. "Get back," JJ whispered to Will, "they're coming in." Assuming he was talking about the Forerunner, he ignored him and readied his rifle. Just as it came to

within sight of the Spartans, it's eyes narrowed down for a split second before opening back up. Turning his head to the left, he hunched over and faced directly forward. His sword dissipated somewhat into a shield that he put over his torso while the orb around him flashed back up. Just then, pillars of water sprayed in the air as heavy rounds began to slam into the concrete. Quickly working their way towards the Forerunner soldiers, the machine guns only took a few rounds to punch through the shields and shred the flesh. Clouds of blood sprayed into the air as the source of the gunfire finally became clear. Three Daggers screamed through the streets before pulling up and rolling to the left, avoiding one of the larger buildings in the city. Another wing of Daggers flew through the streets, machine guns blazing as well as firing off a few rockets into the larger groups of survivors. Throughout all of this, the Forerunner that had found Will's blood in the puddle was still standing. Finding a break in the onslaught, he quickly ran back a block and out of sight. Out of the haze, two Hawks emerged, kicking sideways as they landed just in front of the entrance to the alley. A sudden blast of water sprayed through the narrow corridor, drenching the Spartans even more as they hurried up to their rides. Marines piled out of the backs of the drop ships and headed after those Forerunner who had survived the strafing runs. Overhead, more Daggers and Hawks flew by, fully loaded with troops. Will's section headed over to one of the Hawks, surprised who was inside. Kayla jumped out of the passenger compartment and waved them into it. Piling on board the rain soaked ship, they were glad to just be out of harm's way, if only for a little bit.

> "You're just in time," Will said, smiling.<br> "Yeah, they picked us up when they were heading in and we told them about your situation. Got your messages just outside of the city but we needed to get your position correct and line up for a few runs," she responded as the Hawk lifted off. Clouds of water sprayed up into the air as the powerful engines wound up to full power. A crew member emerged from the cockpit and held onto one of the hand rails overhead. Dressed in full combat gear minus his weapon and helmet, he spoke to all of them as the three doors closed shut, muffling the roar of the engines.

> "We'll be heading to the <em>Tigre<em> ASAP, assuming we can get a safe corridor to it, the fighting is still pretty intense up there. If not, we'll head to our ship, the \_Romulus\_. Let me check that wound out for you," he said, noticing the small bloody circle on Will's shirt. Grabbing a first aid kit, he pulled out a can of biofoam and slid the needle into the hole. White foam seeped out of the charred flesh as it filled in the hole and disinfected at the same time. Leaning back, Will was finally able to rest, at least until they had to run the gauntlet above the planetâ€¦

## 17. Thermopylae Rising

\_A/N: Sorry for the long time since the last update, things got in the way and the computer that had this chapter and at least one more died and so I lost them forever and had no real desire to rewrite them. But seeing as someone has just started reading it and I've had writer's block in regards to another story I'm going to come back and finish this up. So if this chapter and the last seemâ€¦a little disjointed, I apologize but I cannot for the life of me remember where I was planning on taking the story for the next few chapters. Enjoy!\_

## Chapter 17: Thermoplyae Rising

Running through the bright white hangar bay, the eight Spartans hurried to get suited up. Glancing back quickly, Will could see small portions of the planet burning red against the green and blue surroundings. Turning his head slowly back towards the hallway ahead of him he jogged behind the rest of his squad as they made their way throughout the ship. Every so often there would be a violent and stomach churning change in the artificial gravity as the ship made emergency maneuvers. Finally arriving at the locker room, Echo squad began changing into their armor. Leaning over to tighten his boots, an officer walked in completely calm.

> "No need to hurry, we've got a change of plans. Testarossa has been attacked and is our new destination." Leaving just as calmly as he came, the Spartans stopped what they were doing. Leaning back on the bench he was sitting on, Will put his arm across his forehead, closed his eyes, and sighed loudly. The others all dealt with the news a different way, the only thing in common being the complete silence that had overcome the room. Going back to his armor, Will tightened up his boots the rest of the way before stopping once again.<br>

"This was a ploy..." Will said quietly, "All this was was bait so that he could lure the fleet away from the other planets."

> "Looks like it," Chris replied, locking his gauntlets into place. Just then the lights dimmed for a second before they returned to their normal brightness. They had made the jump into Slipspace. Getting up, Will walked out of the room, still only wearing his boots and black under suit. Moving through the hallways slowly, the attitude of the other crew members had changed drastically as they had been calmed by the safety of Slipspace. Letting the different, completely incoherent, thoughts that swarmed around his mind overcome him, Will finally found himself at one of the ports looking at the blackness that surrounded them. Touching his wet hair against the thick glass he rolled his head a little so that his forehead was pressed against the cold surface. Taking a deep breath he started to collect himself. His knowledge of the region they were operating in was less than stellar so he decided to head over to one of the briefing rooms and get acquainted. With a goal now set, he moved through the ship quickly and deliberately. Walking into the dark room he immediately warmed up the holo-projector and navigated around in the computer until he brought up the image of Testarossa. Situated in a relatively secluded area, it was easy to see why they would be a prime target to be attacked, the relatively "short" jump from Thandon would take nine hours. Sitting down in one of the plush chairs, Will put his arms over his head and leaned back, just absorbing everything he was looking at. Bathed in a blue glow, he sat for what seemed like hours before he zoomed out to bring the Sol system into view on the opposite edge, just barely visible. Returning to his former position he again began to analyze the situation. Still displaying the last known positions of the UNSC fleets, something began to emerge. By dragging most of the nearby fleets to Thandon, many of the other systems were completely exposed to enemy incursions. Assuming more of the defending ships as well as some of those engaged at Thandon jumped to Testarossa, all of the fleets within the range of assistance would be tied up with other things. Adding insult to injury, the Inner Colonies were almost completely empty save for a few small terrestrial defense fleets that would be easily pushed over by even a small Forerunner scout force. "Son of a bitch..." All of this flooded Will's mind forming one troubling image: John had successfully lured all UNSC fleets into traps, leaving Earth open for attack. Sitting in shock, he was finally snapped out of it a few



seconds later when Linda walked in.<br> "What are you doing?" she asked, suspicion poking through ever so slightly.

> "John...he's created a gap that's lured a large portion of the fleet into these two concentrated areas...Earth is in a bad spot if they make that run," he said motioning at the almost completely empty piece of space that extended all the way to the Sol system. Mimicking Will's reaction, she sat down on one of the benches silently. Leaning forward she scratched her forehead as her brown hair rolled forward.<br> "Are you going to tell anyone?" she asked, looking up while squinting a little.

> "No...someone's had to have already noticed and seeing as a few hundred ships were setting jump vectors towards Testarossa, I doubt telling anyone would really help all that much. Our best hope is to finish what we need to when we arrive and free up what ships we can so we can try and jump to Earth." Scratching his forehead with his first two fingers and thumb, he then looked away as if he was no longer interested in what was going on.<p>

"Operation Thermoplyae Rising will commence at 0600 hours. Following a secure corridor into the planet's atmosphere we will insert near one of the poles." Sitting in the same room as before but now with his armor on, helmet in his lap, Will listened to the briefing. The man in the front pointed towards the northern ice cap that extended almost a quarter of the way down the planet's surface. "The last report we got since we jumped seemed to show that the enemy is focusing on one of the larger cities right here, Rococo. Why this is or whether or not it was just the easiest point to make a planetside landing, we're not exactly sure but regardless, this city must be kept under human control." Looking around as the other officers took the last of their notes, Will lifted his wrist in the blue light of the hologram.

> "Where are we going to be in the scheme of things?" A few of the soldiers looked over at him curiously while most others showed no response.<br> "As of right now your squad will be going in with the rest of the marine detachment to help secure the city. Any special situations will, undoubtedly, be referred to you." Somewhat disappointed in the response, he decided to not press the issue and got up when the meeting was dismissed.

Walking at a brisk pace, the Spartans entered into the main hangar bay that was, unlike the last time they were in it, buzzing with activity. Almost every single landing pad and platform was occupied by some sort of transport or fighter craft. Walking on the main deck they craned their necks to see Hawks rolling away from platforms and hovering in the air, pointed towards the airlocks and the completely black zone of Slipspace just on the other side of the energy fields. Heading to two Hawks, Will split off with his group towards one while Chris headed towards the other but not before they both made fists with their gauntlets and punched them together. Checking the straps on all of his gear, he climbed into the back of the transport. Already taking up a large amount of space, another marine squad repositioned themselves to give Will, JJ, and Kayla more space.

> "Here, take these," one of the crew member said, handing them four small backpacks that had a one time use parachute folded up inside of it. Hoping he wouldn't have any use for it, Will pulled it over his other gear and locked the strained straps together across his chest. The rear door closed silently, replacing the bright white hangar with dull black titanium. A loud roar and violent shuddering reverberated through the hull as the engines wound up, pushing the craft off the hangar floor. Swaying a little bit, the Hawk got into the take off

pattern and waited for the <em>Tigre</em> to drop out of Slipspace. Starting his mission timer, Will kept a close eye on it as a minute ticked away, followed by another, and then another. Beginning to get antsy he shifted his weight back and forth inside of the crowded and hot passenger compartment. Just as his emotions began to reach their pinnacle, there was a sudden burst of acceleration as the Hawk lurched out of the hangar. Gripping the overhead ring a little tighter, Will suddenly felt sick to his stomach as gravity completely disappeared. Coming off of the floor a little, he moved so that he could see out of one of the portholes. Instead a black plane filled with stars, blue ion rounds crisscrossed back and forth, intersected by missile trails and anti-matter bolts.

> "Shiiit..." one of the marines remarked, face plastered against the clear material. There was a sudden rocking as the Hawk raised it's right wing and dipped the left to help avoid an explosion of flak nearby. The marines were beginning to become visibly distressed as their faces went pale and their vitals skyrocketed. Still completely calm, Will looked over his rifle to make sure nothing was noticeably out of place.<br> "\_Fun ride huh?"\_ Chris chirped over the Spartans' comm channel.

> "Yeah, but the marines don't like it too much," he responded with a slight laugh. Chris chuckled.<br> "\_One of ours threw up and now it's floating around the compartment."\_

> "Ugh," Will said, disgusted. "When we hit the ground, I want to get everyone back together ASAP, no point in being split up."<br>

"\_Affirmative,"\_ Chris responded, back to being one hundred percent serious. Riding out the rest of their journey, the co-pilot opened up the door for a split second and reported that they would be entering the atmosphere any second. Righting himself, Will hung onto the hand grip a little harder as the Hawk rocked back and forth, plasma and heat splashing across it's bow. Gravity slowly returned and his boots were firmly planted against the metal deck. As they slowly descended through the sky, the pilot lowered the rear door, blasting the compartment with cold air. Pulling down the ceiling mounted chain gun, Will planted his feet into small indentations in the deck and scanned back and forth through the thick clouds. Coming in behind them Will saw Chris's Hawk sweeping side to side in an almost identical pattern to that of his own. Just then dark purple bolts of energy lanced across the sky, barely missing the two Hawks. Grabbing onto the gun as tight as possible, he felt their dropship begin to take evasive maneuvers to try and avoid the AA fire they were taking. Breaking out of the cloud layer, there was a golden burst of light from within the clouds. Almost instantly streaks of burning metal tore through the clouds, trails of thick black smoke coming from behind. Following up was the crippled craft, it's starboard wing completely disintegrated. Tumbling around violently, it quickly dropped below their transport, down towards the frozen ground below.

> "Hey! HEY! We need to get down there and help them!" Will radioed to the pilot. Getting down onto his knees he spotted a few large shapes leaving the rear of the dropship.<br> "\_No can do, we're on a set course into the city, if you wanna go save them you'll have to go get them yourselves."\_ Pointing to JJ and Kayla, Will stepped to edge of the passenger compartment before pushing off. Aiming for maximum aerodynamic efficiency, Will kept his arms tight against his sides as he plummeted towards the wreckage below.

> "Spartans, respond." Waiting for some kind of signal he straightened his back and could feel the last few ounces of speed available reach him.<br> "\_Yeah, we're okay,"\_ Linda finally said. Letting the relief of her words rush through his veins, Will let up a

little bit and slowed down his descent. Noticing the small cluster of shapes that he was quickly approaching, Will rolled onto his stomach and put all of his limbs out to increase his drag and slow him down even more. Making small corrections to come in closer as Kayla and JJ reached them, Chris gave a thumbs up and they spread out a little so that each one could deploy their parachute. Kat going first jerked her body as she yanked her arm across her chest, a golden sail flying into the air before pulling taut. The rest repeated the maneuver and slowly floated down. Looking down between his legs, Will saw a large crater where the Hawk's wreckage had landed. Spreading out for another few hundred yards laid the wreckage of the craft, small black craters marking their landing spot. Pulling down on the cords at the last few feet Will came to the ground softly and ran for a few feet as he regained his footing and let the parachute flutter down the brilliant white snow. Crushing it beneath his heavy boots he noticed the armor slowly shift from the dark gray background that was the sky above to a much brighter white. Crumpling up the golden material into a fist sized ball he buried it under some snow along with the backpack it had come in. Shouldering his rifle he brought his squad up around him. Looking out over the white horizon, his order was clear and concise, "Let's get moving."

## 18. Snow

### Chapter 18: Snow

10:24:09. Will felt, one of the rare times in his life, exhaustion from desperation. Watching the mission clock continue to wind upwards he focused his mind on the task ahead of him, or, rather, the white plain ahead of him. Crushing another footprint into the snow with his heavy boots he looked around at the environment that seemed to have stayed static during their long ordeal. 10:24:57. Through the haze of the light snow, Will could begin to see the two parallel mountain chains converge together with a third that ran almost perpendicular to the others. Dreading the sudden increase in their altitude and steepness, he glanced up at the dark gray clouds overhead blocking out the last weak rays of light, the temperature already beginning to drop below freezing again.

> "Man, this is going to be a cold night," JJ remarked over his external speakers. Will agreed with him but didn't say anything, continuing onward. Checking the comm channels again, every single one was completely dead. Beginning to start the same routine he had been following all day to keep his mind off of the aching that was screaming at him in his legs, he brought up the map and located their position on it, putting them about a hundred miles south of the city. He had already done the math and even with severe rationing in combination with a blistering pace, they were unlikely to make it there in under a week. That was assuming there was still a city, or even a planet for that matter, remaining. Switching his rifle to his other arm, he stretched his tight right hand before using it to hold the Battle Rifle at his side again. 10:26:30. Finally forcing his body to stop, the rest of the Spartans gathered around silently. Leaning onto the butt of his rifle, Will let his legs get a brief reprieve before beginning to walk again.<br> 12:57:04. Finally feeling the weariness of twelve hours of walking on top of everything else he had gone through over the past two days finally began to overcome him and he had to stop once more. Moving over towards a jet black rock, he lowered himself down into the snow and let his legs finally begin to rest. The other Spartans did the same, finding a

comfortable position before letting themselves go.

> "Alright, we'll sleep here for the night. I want two people on watch at all times." Both JJ and Matt stated they would take the first watch before Will had even volunteered himself. Content with their actions he rose the internal temperature of the Mk VII a few degrees and closed his eyes, rifle across his chest.<p>

Flames roared all around in hellish pyres that rose hundreds of feet into the air. Columns of smoke poured into the red sky, making it impossible to tell what time of day it was. Stepping over mutilated bodies and piles of debris Will tried to make sense of the two shapes fighting in front of him. Just as he came into view, a blue blade erupted through metal and flesh, the body of Spartan tightening up for a split second before going limp, sliding backwards away from the tip of energy. Waving his hand to brush away a rain of embers, Will was taken back as a building nearby collapsed to the ground sending shockwaves through the concrete and filling the air with the screams and screeches of metal and glass. Overhead a portion of a building fell to the ground, landing directly on top of the other figure. Pushing the rocks out of the way, the silhouetted figure stood up to it's full seven and a half foot height and waited, wisps of smoke coming out of the different portions of the armor, whining noises of servos and pumps just barely audible in the hell the found themselves. Just as the other figure began to turn around, there was a sudden force against Will's shoulder and his rifle was instantly into his shoulder.

> "Hey! Hey! It's just me," someone said, whispering forcefully. Snapping his eyes open, Will surveyed the darkness around him. Standing to his right was another Spartan, bent over a little, hand on his shoulder pad. "Think you could take over for a little bit? I can barely stay awake," Kayla asked. Shaking his head to clear his head he then nodded and raised his hand weakly.<br> "No problem, get some rest." She nodded in return and took his place leaning up against the rock. Switching his view over to night vision/thermal he scanned the frozen plains, not expecting anything, and seeing nothing.

> "<em>Sleep well?" <em>another female voice asked kindly.

> "Not really," he responded quickly, probably too quickly.<br>

"\_Something more than the freezing temperatures and complete lack of contact with UNSC forces?" \_He could here Kat moving around behind him but he kept his focus on the snow around them.

> "It's really nothing."<br> "\_I don't believe you, especially since you were like this when we were on the planet killer..." Closing his eyes for a few seconds, he tried to figure out what to say next. To his right he could see Kat come up next to him, scanning the same area that he was.

> "Just a dream, nothing more." She grunted in approval but he knew she didn't believe him. Off to his left he could see light beginning to filter through the clouds and with a quick check of his mission clock, 23:05:54, he knew it was probably time to get going again. "Let's get the others up, we've got a fun day today." Walking back over to Kayla he nudged her shoulder a little, her head snapping up. "Sorry to wake you up but we're going to need to move."<br> "No problem, I just needed to rest my eyes." She pushed herself up with her left arm and was standing up in only a second. Moving between all of the others the squad was wide awake and ready to begin again. Pushing forward through the haze and darkness he began to make his way up the slowly steepening terrain. Looking up at the mountains that were a few miles off his heart sank a little as he saw now that the pass he had planned to go through was blocked by a large glacier.

Instantly different thoughts began to rush through his head. They had no climbing gear, they weighed a few hundred pounds at the very least, from this distance the glacier could be twenty feet tall or two hundred. Pushing the thoughts out of his mind he stopped and looked around, there were no other visible ways to traverse the mountains and any kind of detour would stretch their already overextended supplies beyond even their limits. Every time he tried to come up with a new plan it always came back to climbing the glacier.

> "Looks we're going to have to climb," Linda said matter of factly.<p>

Staring up at the glacier to his right and the black stone to his left, Will looked for a suitable foothold. Forcing his left foot into a small edge, he pushed himself up and put his right boot into a crack in the ice, putting most of his weight onto his left leg. Looking back up at the hundred foot ice wall and the almost sheer stone he composed himself and found two new foot holds. All around him the sound of the ice creaking and shifting echoed throughout the pass, the closest pops making Will freeze for a few seconds before beginning to slowly move again. Down below him the other Spartans were making their way up except for one who was still waiting, giving the person in front of them a little more room. Reaching up with his right arm he grabbed onto what looked like a sturdy piece of ice only to have it break and crumble in his hand. Losing his balance for only a second, his right foot shifted just a little too much and splintered the ice it was rest on. A cloud of white fell down onto the Spartan below, Matt, who forced his body up against the rock and tucked his chin to his forehead letting the ice deflect off of his shields that suddenly flared up. "Sorry about that, misjudged it."

> "No worries, didn't even feel a thing," he replied with a slight chuckle. Beginning again, Will was even more careful in choosing where to put his limbs to try and prevent what had just happened. Slowly making his way up to the top, he finally reached the edge and grabbed onto it. Making sure it was firm enough he pulled himself up and crawled a few feet before standing up. Now in the middle of the cloud layer, large snowflakes began to fall, severely diminishing his sight and began to hamper his bearings. Crouching down he headed back over to the edge and put his arm over, grabbing onto Matt's. Pulling him up he waited as the others made their way. Helping each get up on top of the glacier, Will finally stepped away from the ledge and looked up the steep incline. Just barely visible in all of the snow and fog he could begin to make out the sides of the mountains that formed the wide pass. On his right side, about a mile away in front of him, a small bulge of black rock jutted out into the middle of the glacier that abruptly formed with the rest of the obscured peak. Much closer to them another small outcrop formed from the peak to their left although much smaller in size. Having a hard time making anything out in the weather, Will was finally able to spot the different branching paths that led up to different portions of the mountain. Crouching down in the snow he brought a topographical map and located their exit pass on the thermal satellite image. Looking up at the pass itself he could see the narrow band of snow on the far left. Standing back up he marked it with a NAV point and began walking. As they walked the weather continued to steadily get worse as the wind picked up and the snow came down even harder. Crouching down to keep from getting knocked over he continued to push forwards as he made his way towards the hovering blue triangle. Despite it being the afternoon he was forced to flick on his helmet lamps, illuminating the area in front of him. Putting one leg in front of

the other, his attention was suddenly broken when a small blue icon began blinking on his HUD. Drawn as a small radio tower with waves emanating from the tip, it represented the acquisition of a radio signal.<br> "This is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three, come in." Tucking his head behind his left shoulder and into his chest he tried to listen for anything to come in over their radio.

> "<em>Reading you loud and clear Oh-Four-Three. My Dagger wing is coming near your location. Mind telling us what you're doing there?"<em>The pilot's stereotypical twang caught Will off guard a little but more so because they would be picked up.

> "Our Hawk was shot down as we came in."<br> "\_Shame, we'll be there in a few minutes, hang tight."\_

> "Affirmative, over and-." Staring up at the passes, he began to see a dark cloud moving down the one they were heading towards.

"<em>Shit,"<em> he said loudly.

> "<em>What's wrong? What's the problem?"<em>

> "We've got a lot of bad guys moving in on our position." Pointing to five of the Spartans he motioned to the large outcropping he had spotted earlier. Grabbing JJ he headed towards the smaller outcropping. Running up the black rocks they got behind cover and watched the Forerunners advance towards their position. As they began to come into view better he could see large dark shapes intermixed with the foot soldiers.<br> "Damn it, they've got heavy armor but we're not equipped with anti-tank weapons," Will said, radioing everyone.

> "That's not exactly true," JJ said, pulling his backpack in front of him. Opening it up, Will saw that it was stuffed with satchel charges.<br> "Jesus, what were you planning on using those for?" Just shrugging his shoulders he proceeded to pull out seven charges. "Alright, put them out there along their general path, we'll set them off when they get close."

> "I've got a better idea, we're on a glacier correct? That's made of ice on a slope? Why don't we just blow them and send a sheet of ice flying down the mountain?" Stopping for a second Will figured it would be worth a shot. JJ took hold of them with his left arm and began to make his way down the rocks. Reach the snow he began to sprint across the open ground, laying a charge down every so often. As he was doing this Will pulled a suppressor out of his bag and screwed it onto the front of his rifle. Looking back across the glacier he could JJ placing the last satchel charge, disappearing into the other outcrop. Only a few miles away the Forerunners made their slow advance down the glacier. Sitting down next to a rock, he propped his leg up onto a small boulder in front of him and rested his rifle on his knee, taking aim at his enemy.<br> "Hold off on picking us up, we've got an ambush set up," Will radioed to the pilot.

> "<em>Affirmative."<em> Watching and waiting, the Forerunners slowly made their way past the ambush spot when JJ set off the satchel charges. Seven orange and black explosions blossomed into the air. Plumes of snow and ice rained down on the glacier as the heat washed over the ice, instantly vaporizing it. All throughout the pass the shockwaves and reverberations from the explosion shook the rocks that Will was sitting on. Staring at the large craters and fractures that had formed from the explosion. Waiting a few seconds nothing happened.

> "Light 'em up!" He finally called out to his squad. Standing up from behind his cover he opened fire with his rifle, not used to the quiet "thwap" of the silencer. Just as he was getting ready to switch magazines he heard a low rumbling off to his left. Glancing over he saw a frightening sight. Roaring down the mountain was a wave of

boiling snow heading straight for them. Hurrying down to get on the backside of the rock hill he was standing on, he found a small indentation in the rocks and got up against it. Having only a few seconds to spare as the ground began to shake violently, the avalanche suddenly roared over the rocks, slamming into the ground just a few feet in front of him. In an instant the snow began to fill up on every surface it could cling to. Just as fast as it came, the air around him cleared of the wall of snow, he slowly exited his cover, pushing the feet of snow out of the way that had come in those few seconds. Looking around, the snowflakes continued to fall and the wind continued to howl as if nothing had happened. "Linda? Chris? Are you guys alright?" Walking out from the rocks and onto the glacial field he waited for a response.<br> "\_Ugh...yeah, we're alright. That was something though wasn't it?" \_Linda replied back. Will laughed a little as the roar of the Daggers was audible.

## 19. New Mission

### Chapter 19: New Mission

Pulling two thick black straps over his shoulders, Will strapped himself into the rear facing seat of the Dagger. Hooking in the crotch strap he gave a thumbs up to the pilot. Roaring to life, the engines blew clouds of snow into the air as it lurched into the air, leaving Will's stomach back on the ice. Ascending into the cloud layer, the pilot didn't speak until they had risen above them. Blinded by the sun's glare off of the cotton like surface, he put his arm up to cover his face as his visor began to adjust to help filter the light.

> "<em>Plateea is in a pretty tight spot right now, Forerunners have control of most of the city but we've blockaded the river crossings and aren't letting anything get by. Apparently they're planning to try and break through the lines and form a pincer move on another bridge so that they can make sure the space elevator is secure."<br><em>Legs dangling into the abyss, Will listened to the pilot speak.

> "Are there regular reinforcements coming in?"<br> "\_That's the plan, it's a little tougher than that with the occasional enemy picket but we've been managing fairly well."\_ Looking on his topographical map, Will made sure he had at least a general idea of what the city's layout was. Focusing almost solely on the Human controlled region he began to formulate a mental image of the terrain. The city, split about two-thirds of the way down by a river was nestled in a small mountain valley with plenty of high plateaus that allowed for a prime artillery position. Guessing as to where the Humans were he looked at those areas, he tried to figure out where the attack would take place and where it would go from there. "\_Hang on tight, this is going to be a bumpy ride."\_ Grabbing onto his straps, Will looked back at the clouds to see a black haze. Suddenly the Dagger dipped down and went through the cloud layer. Holding on as the aircraft shook violently, dropping through the cloud layer, the light began to fail as the clouds turned gray and mixed with acrid black smoke. Not wanting to be caught off guard, Will reached up to remove his rifle from the small rack located over his head. Shouldering it, he waited as the Dagger continued to rock back in forth in the almost black cloud layer.

> "Turn on your head lamps, we're going to need the visibility." Flicking on all four lights, the bright beams illuminated the clouds and smoke as they made a sharp turn. Looking around he could see the

clouds begin to thin out and every so often there was a quick glimpse of the city before the clouds enveloped them. Off to his left, the Dagger with the other three Spartans slowed down and got behind them just as they pierced through the clouds and were flying over the city. Suddenly hit by a sickening sense of vertigo, he closed his eyes for a few seconds as the Dagger descended down. Slowly reopening them, the feeling dissipated and he began to take in the view of the city. Bathed in red glow from the many fires that burned in the streets, columns of thick black smoke poured into the sky blocking out the sun. The once glorious buildings that served as a beautiful foreground to the snow covered mountains were now mere shells of themselves, large portions of them blown away while others had already collapsed to the streets below leaving large clouds of dust in their wake. Everything about the scene seemed vaguely familiar to him as they flew over the river, quickly dropping down and slowing their speed. Just as the Dagger began to hover on it's way down to the landing pad Will realized it was the city he had repeatedly seen in his dreams. Keeping his thoughts to himself he knew that somewhere within the city, or eventually, he would be face to face with John and one of his comrades would be dead. Before the Dagger had fully touched down Will was already unstrapping himself and preparing to get off. Feeling the wheels touch the makeshift landing pad he jumped off of his seat and moved away from the clouds of dust and smoke that was being whipped up by the engines. The other Spartans got off after him and followed him away from the emptied parking lot. All around them war had touched the city from the random bullet hole to an entire building reduced to rubble. Obviously in a poorer, more residential section of the town, the buildings were of older architectural design and much smaller than most of the other city. Moving past derelict cars towards the sounds of the war zone, it was almost like walking in a time capsule as, intermingled with the craters and rubble were snowmen built in the yard and snow removal equipment still in the middle of the process. Looking up, he wondered what it would be like to see the dropships raining down from the sky, illuminated by the AA fire from the ground, soon to be followed by Human forces trying to defend what remained of the city. Slogging through the slush in the street, Will walked up onto the sidewalk and moved a little quicker on the bare pavement, his helmet lamps illuminating the street in an eerie white glow compared to the red of the sky.<br> "Ooh..." Kat said, her voice lined with pain. Stopping and looking back he saw her stooped over something next to a car, moving her arms gingerly. Standing back up she was holding a baby in her arms. At first appearing dead, the small child, still in cotton pajamas, turned it's head and looked at the Spartans with big almond eyes, completely aware of the situation. Completely dumbfounded as to how it arrived there, Will looked for signs of the parents half-heartedly.

> "Find the nearest field hospital and take it there, make sure it's alright, ok?" he said, making it clear he wanted her to stay with the baby.<br> "Affirmative." She stood still for a few seconds until she located the nearest hospital. Walking a few feet, she stopped again. "Linda? Could you help me here?" Positioning the child so that it was cradled in her left arm and shoulder, she held out her right gauntlet and popped the seal on it. Sliding it off revealing her bare hand, Linda put the gauntlet into Kat's backpack. "Thanks." Caressing the child's cheek with her hand she walked away from them in slowly as if completely unaware of the battle raging just a few blocks away. > "Let's go," Will said, pushing the anxiety of splitting Kat up from the group out of his mind. Walking towards the street in front of them, the sounds of war intensified as they reached the corner.



Peeking around it, he could see the flashes of muzzles, briefly illuminating the area before disappearing. Ready his rifle, he came around the corner low and began to run towards a group of Marines who were standing up near a blown out building. Coming up to them, only two of them turned to face him as the others continued to be focused on what they were dealing with. Dirt and blood were smeared across their faces and the weariness was visible on their faces as they smiled weakly at the Spartans standing in front of them.  
> "Nice to see some new faces here...or visors, in your case. We haven't had any substantial reinforcements since the battle started, seems like we were passed over somewhere up the line." Look at the Marines' ranks, none of them were officers.

> "Don't worry, we're here to help." Turning towards one of the rundown bridges, Will was able to see burning wreckage scattered throughout it, thick black smoke pouring into the air. "We were told that an offensive was being planned?"  
> "Planned would be the operative word there. Comms is a fucking mess and by the time we can get runners up and down the lines, the point where we're attacking always seems to have some kind of incident that changes everything. So yes, there is an assault being planned, but it's not going to get anywhere." All around, Marines were crouched behind whatever they could find, popping up every so often to fire off a few bursts before a hail of anti-matter bolts slammed into the cover.

> "Do you have any idea as to where they could be at?" The Marine turned around and ducked down a little as he looked out at the other side of the river.  
> "We really can't get any substantial reports from over there but from where the fire seems to be coming from...they've concentrated mostly around the bridge and any other points of incursion. Not to mention there have been rumors of armor."

> "Those are most likely true, when we were coming in we encountered some but we really couldn't get a good look at them or it's capabilities."  
> "Sir?" one of the other Marines said, tapping the one Will was speaking to on the shoulder. "FleetComm wants to know if you have Spartans at your location."

> "Well obviously!" The radio operator made a face with "my bad" written all over it.  
> "That is affirmative FleetComm, we have seven Spartans at our position." Pressing the headset against his ear to hear better over the fighting he turned around and spoke to Will. "They want you to tune to the J-band, channel 18." Doing so, Will switched over to the secure channel.

> "This is Spartan Oh-Four-Three reporting."  
> "\_A new mission has been given to us by ONI Section Three. An R and D was inbound to the city but they were shot down over enemy controlled territory. They were carrying a experimental weapon, the Nova III. About an hour ago we began to receive a signal from it's transponder device meaning it is still operational and could be fired at any moment. We need you and your team to go and secure it before the enemy does."\_

> "Do you have any idea where it's at?"  
> "\_Mission info is on it's way to you right now, it has everything you'll need to know. Over and out." \_The channel then went dead as Will went back to monitoring the local chatter as well as within his own squad.

> "Sergeant, we've just been assigned to a new mission," removing his helmet, Will spoke face to face with the Marine. "My team and I will be inserting into the city to retrieve a classified object. We're going to need some cover fire so that we can get across and then a transport to get us out of there."  
> "I can guarantee the covering fire but the transport is up to the flyboys, nothing I can do there. But if they won't help, we'll come and get you out, you can count on us." A determined look came across the Marine's face. Extending an

arm, Will shook his hand and put his helmet back on. Turning towards the river a sudden feeling of dread fell over him. As he explained everything to the Spartans who had taken up positions around the block he was going over the information they had given him. As luck would it, the Hawk had been shot down near the city center and completely in the open.

> "<em>Well shit, if we knew this ahead of time we could've just had the Dagger drop us off,<em>" JJ commented with a tone of annoyance.

> "Yeah, well, they didn't so we're going to have to do this the hard way. We're going to drop over the walls and go across the river, coming up from underneath. The Marines are going to provide covering fire for us up top to hopefully keep their attention diverted long enough for us to get up and over. After that, well," looking at the satellite photo it was almost impossible to get a good idea as to where the Hawk was actually located within the city due to the hot smoke and below freezing temperatures messing up the thermal image, "Well, we're just going to take it from there."<br> "\_Sounds good,\_" Kayla said reassuringly.

> "Let's get this show on the road."<p>

## 20. Parallel Paths

### Chapter 20: Parallel Paths

Boots slamming into the frozen water, Will sprinted across the open ground to take cover on the concrete wall opposite of where he was just at. Staring up, he could see rounds from both sides flashing back and forth illuminating the scene in bright flashes of gold as tracer rounds arced overhead. Back on the other side the rest of his squad dropped down to the river and came across, taking up positions to his left, rifles at the ready. Splitting them into two teams, he kept Matt and Kayla with him, sending Chris, JJ, and Linda to the other side of the bridge. Taking his back off of the concrete, he primed a grenade and just barely lobbed it over the wall. Two seconds went by before it exploded, showering them with debris from up above. In front of him landed what looked like the shredded arm of a Forerunner, small wisps of smoke trailing into the air from the point at which it was torn away. Preparing to jump up, he crouched down a little before thrusting himself into the air, getting a hold of the newly formed ledge from the grenade. Pulling himself up with one arm he kicked the body of the Forerunner who's arm he had seen. Looking to his right, the creatures were focused on the entrance to the bridge, taking little notice to the Spartan. Putting his arm over the ledge he helped Kayla get up with him. Taking aim, she fired off a grenade from the underslung grenade launcher, hitting one of them dead on and shredding it's torso. The others, alerted by the sudden attack, turned around, all the while being peppered by rounds from their rifles until the creatures fell to the ground in a puddle of their own blood. Over to their left a little, more Forerunners were coming to reinforce the bridge.

> "Is your team up?" Will radioed to Chris.<br> "\_We're all here, tangos down."\_

> "Good, get to the buildings, we need to try and stay out of sight." Sprinting across the street, the Forerunners missed them completely as they sent a hail of fire back down towards the Marines. Taking cover in a the remains of a lobby that was a shell of it's former glamor, they waited in darkness. Sliding in a new clip for his rifle as silently as possible, Will kept his eyes on the enemy, doing

everything by instinct. Satisfied no more were coming, he radioed Chris.  
"Move out, stay low and watch our backs in case the Marines are too good and force a retreat." An acknowledgment light winked onto his HUD and Will moved his squad out of the lobby. Heading down the blown out streets his head was constantly swinging back and forth, always on the look out. Checking his maps again, he was finally able to get a decent idea as to where they were at based on buildings that were appearing on both maps after being cross-referenced. Stopping at an intersection, he motioned for Chris to cut across and start heading perpendicular to their original direction. JJ ran across first, taking cover in a stairwell that led up to another building's lobby. Chris then went across as Linda aimed her sniper rifle down range looking for targets.

> "Go, we've got you covered." Lowering her rifle she ran full sprint into the street. About halfway across, a stream of anti-matter started to fly all around Linda. At first it was inaccurate but it quickly zeroed in on her, flaring her shields up blue before they blew off. Heading over towards Chris's squad's former position, Will saw that a squad of Forerunner had come around the corner but were in their blind spot. Opening up full auto, his rounds impacted caused the shields their shields to flare up as they ducked behind the cover of the abandoned vehicles. Turning around he saw that Linda was lying the street unmoving. Glancing back for a split second, he ran back towards her position, waving Kayla off and then pointing to where he had just been. Coming up to her, he could see that she had been hit at least twice, once on the inside of her left thigh and a second on her right shoulder. It was also obvious, from looking at the burn marks and portions where the active camouflaging had malfunctioned, returning to the default white metal, that she had been hit more than once. Positioning himself so that he could face the Forerunners, he brought up her vitals on his HUD and saw that, despite her wounds, nothing serious had happened. "Chris, JJ, I want you to move up and help them out, I'll take care of her." Two acknowledgment lights winked on and the two Spartans ran past him, taking cover behind an empty truck on the opposite corner. Moving Linda into a better position to lift, he finally had to sit down and drag her up and over him before he could easily get her onto his shoulder. Grunting loudly as he got onto his knees and then stood up, one leg at a time, he walked slowly towards the stairs and walked up to a large open area above the street. Setting her down gently, Will removed her helmet to let her breathe a little better. Flirting with unconsciousness, her eyes rolled back and forth as they lazily scanned the area. "Hey, hey, stay with me alright?" Reaching down to her leg he undid the armor that covered her thigh revealing the black under armor, gel from the crystalline layer oozing out. Gingerly reaching up at the top of her leg, he tore a large section of the layer away just as a few small geysers of blood sprayed across his armor before falling to a steady, but manageable rate. Pushing down with his arm, he kept the bleeding contained as he grabbed a can of biofoam. Sliding the nozzle into the wound, he injected the chemical, withdrawing the nozzle as the foam expanded and stopped the bleeding. Moving to her shoulder, he removed the armor plate and peeled away a little more of the undersuit before inserting the nozzle and sealing up the wound. "You alright?" he asked her.

"Yeah, can I have a gun?" she asked, still weak sounding. Unsure as to where her sniper rifle was, he handed her his rifle, pulling out his pistol and moving towards the other set of stairs. Looking out into the street, a fierce gun battle had developed with both sides firing small bursts before taking cover. The Forerunners were ducking down behind cars, that, when shot with JJ's SAW caused a shower of sparks to spray all over the place.

Noticing one of the enemy seemed to be lacking shields, he took aim with his pistol and fired off four shots, two of them connecting with his exposed head, two clouds of purple blood spraying out onto the road.

> "<em>Grenade out!<em>" Someone yelled. A few seconds later a golden explosion flashed in the street, pushing one of the cars a few feet away before it's hydrogen cell exploded in a brief burst of flames, tearing the rear of the car apart and sending even more shrapnel out. Out of the smoke and flame, Will could easily spot the remnants of some of the Forerunners while the last two moved away from their dangerous cover and headed towards somewhere a little safer, finally using an information kiosk. Running down the stairs, he watched as Chris and JJ repositioned so that they had a better view of the kiosk, moving ever closer until they were fired on, then pulling back a little and waiting. Coming up next to them, Will put a new magazine into the pistol before grabbing a grenade. Pulling the pin, he held the safety trigger.

> "Once they come out, open up on them." Chris and JJ nodded as Will stood up and lobbed the grenade next to the kiosk. The explosion ripped the small building apart and sent the Forerunners flying into the wall and out onto the street. The two Spartans were already waiting and unloaded full automatic, Chris with his rifle and JJ with the SAW. Once they were finished, both of the bodies had been almost completely ripped open, portions of their bodies sprayed across the road.<br> "All clear," Will reported.

John paced back and forth impatiently, his eyes focused on whatever was immediately in front of him. Off to his right he could hear someone enter through the large stone doors into his private chambers. Looking up, he pivoted on his heels and put his arms behind his back.

> "Our fleet has just arrived at Testerossa. First reports are saying that the orbital defenses were easily overwhelmed and troops are now making their way to the planet's surface." John grunted in approval as he stood contemplating his next move.<br> "Is there an estimate to the amount of ships jumping towards the planet?"

> "Yes, we have discovered twenty-three individual jump vectors towards the planet. Most are coming from nearby systems, one from Thandon. I'll return when we have a more comprehensive report."<br> "Thank-you." Look out a window as the soldier left, his mind focused on everything that was happening, constantly analyzing it from different angles to try and determine what the outcome would be.

> "Oh...sir, I almost forgot to inform you. You told us to tag any communications that had the word "Spartan" in it. There were a few that got picked up that had requests for air support as well as a Slipspace jump. The others were for evacuation orders, but the group referred to in those communiques was killed on their ship." Looking down at a data pad, the Forerunner quickly read more of the report. "It was determined that the ship that the surviving Spartans were on board was the <em>UNSC Tigre,<em> the same ship that jumped to Testerossa." Suddenly alert to this piece of news, John stepped forward slowly.

> "You're sure of this?" he asked, his voice low.<br> "The information seems accurate, although I have not verified-"

> "It's good enough for me. Prepare a ship for Testerossa." The soldier nodded and began jogging away. "One more thing...find an unused communications channel so I can have a little chat."<p>

A/N: I know some of you wanted me to move away from the paragraph format but it causes problems when there are splits in the story (as

there is here) and so I'm just going to stick with this format, sorry.

## 21. Turning the Tables

### Chapter 21: Turning the Tables

"\_Uh...sir, we've got a possible situation here...\_" Will got up from tending to Linda and looked at Chris who was standing straight up, staring at him. Watching the Spartan turn back around, his eye went up the street, finally resting on something off in the distance. Cocking his head slightly in confusion, he instantly reacted when he saw a sudden flash of light from it.

> "GET DOWN!" An explosion rocked him as the tank round impacted on the corner of the platform they had taken refuge on. "Ugh...shit..." he grunted as debris rained down onto him. Heading over to Linda, he picked her up and slowly walked away from where she had just been sitting. Another round skimmed right over the decorative ledge and impacted exploded in the building to their right. Glass and metal erupted from the explosion, mixing with the concrete and dirt from the first shot. Going down the stairs as fast as possible, Will heard another shot impact to his left but could only see some small debris flying out into the street. Over their internal comm channel, Chris and JJ were arguing as to how they were going to deal with the armor in light of their lack of anti-tank weapons.<br> "\_You can't draw fire from a tank! We need to pull back and try and bring it in closer to us."\_

> "I want everyone to fall back to my position right now. Drop smoke to mask our movement." The Spartans complied, pulling out smoke grenades and tossing them out into the street. Thick blue smoke began to pour out of the small green canisters, slowly rising into the air, the smoke finally caught the drafts that tore whipped around the buildings, quickly swirling around in tornadoes of smoke. Once the cloud was sufficiently thick enough, the Spartans pulled back and headed towards Will. Looking around, he tried to visually find a new way to get to their objective. "That street should bring us out about two blocks away from the center," he said, pointing at the street directly in front of them. "I want two of you to help get her back to an aid station because, no offense, you'll slow us down too much." Nodding her head, she easily conveyed her disappointment as he helped her over towards Kayla and Matt. Looking back quickly he could see the smoke was beginning to thin out. Pulling out his only smoke, he hurled it down the street, a small trail of smoke falling to the ground as the canister fell to the ground. Standing up he led the remaining members of his squad, Chris and JJ, in the opposite direction to head towards the downed Pelican. As they walked through the streets, they continually looked to make sure the tank was nowhere nearby. After walking a few blocks north, Will took a knee on the sidewalk and looked through the thick haze that surrounded them, their vision hampered even more by the red light from the fires. Trying to make sure everything was clear, alarms started to blare in his ears as radiation levels began to skyrocket. Moving up towards the end of the sidewalk, he stopped when he saw what was happening. Sitting in the middle of the street was a ball of writhing blue energy. Bolts of energy would occasionally latch to another surface and drag along it, completely destroying whatever it touched. Slowly the radiation began to drop down as the energy began to coalesce in the middle of the street. No longer a loose ball of energy, it came into itself, the blots of energy keeping within itself until it was a

blinding orb of light. Standing up, Will was not in the mood to be nearby if it started to do anything. But as he looked back, he could see JJ and Chris staring at what appeared to be another orb forming just a few blocks behind them. Shocked by the sudden blaring of alarms again, a feeling began to wash over him as the peril of their situation continued to become more and more apparent.<br> "Chris, get FleetComm, there's no way we can move."

> "Affirmative."<br> Moving back to the corner, he watched the orb continue to boil in the air until in an eruption it was no longer there. Blowing him backwards, Will skidded across the street on his back, rifle between his legs. Looking at what had happened, he wasn't exactly sure as to what he was looking at. Replacing the orb was what almost seemed like a window that spanned the entire street. Peering inside, he could see the dark interiors of something large. Down at street level, something moved and caught his eye. Putting his zoom onto his HUD in a picture in picture display, he could clearly make out the shape of a Forerunner soldier. Pressing down the trigger, rounds began to fly towards it, impacting on his shielded helmet. Emptying out his clip, he got up as fast as possible and ran towards JJ and Chris who were torn between watching the second orb and what had just happened.

> "Negative on getting the channel, I'm not even getting static like all of the other channels. It's completely dead."<br> "Get inside, NOW!" he said, completely ignoring his report on the channel. Dipping his shoulder, he charged through the glass, shattering it into a million pieces. Heading towards the stairwell, another shockwave rippled down the street as the second orb stabilized. At that exact moment, radiation levels skyrocketed again as a bright light came from a third street, directly across from the first portal. Slamming open the door, his feet pounded into the concrete steps, the three Spartans sprinting up the stairs.\

> "If you don't mind me noting, this isn't the smartest tactical move we could've made," Chris noted only half sarcastically.<br> "There's nowhere else for us to go, they're boxing us in." Continuing up the stairs, they had reached the thirty-ninth floor before going onto it. Walking into the deserted offices, they slowly moved about in the barren and uninviting maze of cubicals and computer stations. Moving towards the windows, Will looked through the haze and smoke to see a large group of Forerunner moving around outside of the building. Intermingled with the infantry were large tanks, hovering above the ground. Sporting a single, flattened out cannon, they hovered on two blades, the engines built into the rear. All the while, more infantry poured out of the portals, some moving away from the buildings while most began to situate themselves into the four large columns stretching away from the intersection below. "Someone important is coming..." Will said out loud, although to no one in particular. "Chris, do you have mines?"

> "Uhh...yeah, I've got a few."<br> "Alright, put them in the stairwell a few floors down. JJ, jerry rig some grenades to be used as booby traps. Once Chris is back, put them right outside of the door." Both of the Spartans physically acknowledged his commands and sat about doing their work. Switching of all broadcasts except for outside bands, he began hailing everyone and anyone. "This is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three...Fallen Angel, I repeat, Fallen Angel." Reluctantly, he enacted the protocol for soldiers in danger of being over run. Desperately hoping for some kind of air support, he watched all of the channels for some kind of response. "This is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three. We are pinned down behind enemy lines with a large concentration of at least four hundred troops in our immediate vicinity, supported by heavy armor." Taking a deep breath, he walked

back towards JJ who suddenly stood up and threw something.

> "Live grenade!" ducking out of the way, the grenade exploded in a flash of brilliant golden light, shattering panes of glass and shredding nearby desks. Bolting up, he looked over at JJ.<br> "What the hell happened!"

> "I'm not sure, the detonator just turned on when I was trying to remove it." Walking back towards a spider webbed window, he looked down to see soldiers running into the building. "Shit... Chris, get up here now, you're going to be having company soon."<br> "\_Almost finished, I'll be there in a few seconds.\_"

> "Negative, that was a direct order!" Chris didn't respond and Will knew it would be no use trying to convince him to come up. Looking out, Will could see a transport heading towards their position. Not recognizing it as one of their own, he watched it fly by and make it's slow descent to the ground. Similar to the ones he had seen on Thandon, Will felt something tugging at his body and his soul.<br> "\_I'm done, coming up...whoa, there are a lot of baddies heading our way." \_Bringing up a picture in picture of what Chris was seeing, the helmet camera was pointed down the stairwell, muzzle flashes illuminating the stairwell silently. As the Forerunner came closer and closer, their return fire grew heavier and heavier, blowing chunks of concrete off as well as melting the metal railings. In complete disbelief, Will rushed into the stairwell and could see Chris a few floors below him. Looking down the dizzying space to the ground floor, he saw a Forerunner down at the bottom of it, a large weapon in his hand. Only reacting to the bright flash it emitted, Will dove against a wall as it impacted below him. Rocking the ground he was standing on, his vision was obscured by a cloud of concrete floating in the air. Moving down the steps cautiously, he finally saw a large chunk of the stairs and surrounding wall blown away, exposing the pipes and electrical work in between floors. Listening to the sound of pouring water and footsteps, he tried to locate Chris from the farthest point he could go. Bringing up his team's statuses, Chris's vitals were almost non-existent. Swearing under his breath, he switched to his thermal vision, always wary of the red dots on his motion tracker growing steadily larger. Finally, in a pile of rubble, two floors down, he spotted a warm object.

> "Chris, what's your status?" he said urgently. No response. Spotting a Forerunner just a few floors below Chris, he let out a burst of gunfire, causing it to duck for cover before firing off a burst of return fire. Looking back at Chris with his thermal vision still on, he could see a large stream of warm blood flowing away from his body. Firing off another burst, Will frantically looked for some way to get to Chris in some vain attempt at saving his life. But just as he was about to jump down to him, an alarm began to blare in his ears as Chris's EKG monitor flashed red as it flatlined. Clenching his jaw, Will turned the alarm off and hurried back up the stairs. Just before he moved into the office, an explosion rocked the stairwell as the mines went off, his final contribution to Humanity. Looking over at JJ who had the grenade traps ready to be set, he motioned for him to move. "Put them randomly as we go up." The two Spartans ran up the stairs, stopping every so often to place a trap. All the while, he used Chris's camera to try and figure out what the Forerunners were doing to avoid the obstacle they had created. After a few minutes his view was obscured and he shut off the picture. It was only a matter of time before they would get up and only a little longer until they made their last stand. Finally reaching the top floor, the eighty-third, they ran up through the maintenance ways till they made it to the roof top. Opening up the door to the gravel top, they were buffeted by the natural winds as well as those

generated by the firestorm that raged throughout the city. Adding an oddly beautiful element to the hell they were in, fragile snowflakes whipped around them before being lost to the black and red clouds that obscured the ground below. "This is Spartan-Oh-Four-Three, we are severely diminished in strength and are facing vastly superior numbers right now. We request immediate assistance now!" Shaking his head at the lack of response, he looked over at JJ who was rummaging through his bag.<br> "Oh...you've gotta be kidding me," he said, laughing. Raising his arm into the air, Will had a hard time at first making out what he was holding. Then, his eyes attracted to the whipping end, he could see a high strength tether grasped in his hands like some kind of grand trophy. Moving closer, he watched as JJ produced another one.

> "Why do you have these?"<br> "I had them from Thandon. Didn't clean out my bag, just tossed more things in. Good thing now..." Walking over to the edge, Will looked down the side of the building in hopes of seeing some place they could repel to. Turning around, JJ had already begun to tie them together. Moving over the edge, Will kept his rifle and his attention focused on the entrance to the rooftop as JJ anchored the rope down. Waiting for him to begin heading down, he looked over to see JJ grabbing his rifle again, then shouldering it.

> "You go first, I can hold them off if they come up. Without you, our squad will be leaderless," Pausing for a second, he then spoke again. "Without out...we won't survive at all." Like with Chris, there was no point in arguing because it would be both of their deaths. Standing up, he walked over to JJ and took his hand tightly, nodding ever so slightly. Then going over to the tether he hooked himself onto it and swung his legs over the side. Sliding down the rope, he kicked off of the windows carefully so that he wouldn't break them. As he was going down, JJ would give a progress report of the situation or would make a short comment about something insignificant. Then, his attitude shifted. "<em>If I hadn't messed up with that grenade, they probably never would've come after us, or at least not that soon. So if they hadn't come after us, Chris would've had time to come back up and we could've waited till help came<em>," laughing as one does when resigned to their fate, he continued on. "\_We wouldn't have to be doing\_ this\_ either, me stuck up here, you dangling in the air. Hmm, well, everything happens for a reason I guess. Beating of a Butterfly's wings causing a typhoon shit?I just wish I could've told-," \_cutting himself off, he snapped out of his reminiscing. "\_They triggered the last grenade. I'd say I've got about thirty seconds till they come through.\_" Looking down below, Will could see a sky bridge only thirty feet below him.

> "Get on right now and just slide all of the way down, I'm over an exit right now."<br> "\_Negative on that, they'll know someone escaped. And seeing as they know of only two Spartans, they'll never come looking for you." \_Releasing his grip, Will planted his feet onto the glass ceiling with a thud.

> "Alright, I made it down...good luck up there."<br> "\_Mmm, will do. Over and out." \_Listening to the comm channel crackle out was like listening to a death sentence being read. Over head, gunshots rang out, slowly echoing down towards him. Just then the rope slammed into the sky bridge before sliding off the edge to the street. Moving over towards the concrete joint on the bridge, he pressed his body against it to try and stay as concealed as possible. Almost as fast as the shooting started, it stopped. Listening to the sounds of the battle from around the city, he was startled when his comm channel fizzed for a few seconds. Adding to his surprise was the fact that it was coming fro JJ.



> "<em>Been a long time since we've spoken Will.<em>" The voice he heard, though, pierced his body like a million frozen daggers.  
"\_Forty years, no?\_"  
> "What do you want?" he responded monotonously.<br> "\_What everyone wants. Power. With each step I take, each breath I take, I move closer and closer to exterminating humanity from the face of the universe.\_"  
> "You'll still be left, going to turn your guns on yourself then?"<br> "\_Hahaha, you wish. I think we'll speak very soon though so I'll let you get going, wherever you are.\_" With the sound of a gunshot, their conversation was over. Standing frozen, he jerked back to awareness when a body slammed onto the corner of sky bridge before falling into the clouds again. Sliding down to the ground, he sat staring forward, suddenly feeling completely alone and afraid for the first time in his life.

End  
file.